

**READING BETWEEN THE MINDS:  
INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF MODERNISM  
FROM ROBERT BROWNING TO HENRY JAMES**

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

*For my parents, Alan and Mary Kay Hann*

*And in memory of Shaughnessy*

Is the creature too imperfect, say?  
Would you mend it  
And so end it?  
Since not all addition perfects aye!

Or is it of its kind, perhaps,  
Just perfection—  
Whence, rejection  
Of a grace not to its mind, perhaps?

Shall we burn up, tread that face at once  
Into tinder,  
And so hinder  
Sparks from kindling all the place at once?

—Robert Browning, “A Pretty Woman” (1855)

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and to ignore it. All of which will perhaps pass but for a supersubtle way of pointing the plain moral that a young embroiderer of the canvas of life soon began to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface, of the boundless number of its distinct perforations . . .

—Henry James, Preface to *Roderick Hudson* (1908)

*I am writing and absorbed in my ideas. By the side of the keyboard is a catalogue from a university press, newly arrived in the mail. I haven't yet looked at it. My eyes stray. I stop writing and pick the catalogue up. The world of scholarship is suddenly spread out before me at a slight but not sufficient distance, available for my observation, one book, and then another, and then a third, so many, and each of them finished. “I seem to see all that can be—and I am tired and sick of it.”\* I write no more that day.*

—Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection* (2008)

\* The quotation is from George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

## ABSTRACT

As its title suggests, “Reading Between the Minds” offers a revisionist history of the literary development of intersubjectivity, a concept derived from the phenomenology of *fin-de-siècle* German philosopher Edmund Husserl and later adopted by theorists from a wide range of critical schools, from hermeneutics to reader-response to psychoanalysis. In its broadest definition, intersubjectivity connotes the dynamic mental and emotional interactions that take place between discrete individuals. Depending on the philosophical context in which it is used, the term can refer to either how the self experiences relations with others as subjects fundamentally unknowable to itself (what is called “skepticism” or “the problem of other minds”), *or*, somewhat differently, how the self and the other converge to create an experience of shared meaning, often although not always through linguistic communication. As a thematic concern that raises questions of perspective and reference which in turn have natural consequences for literary form, intersubjectivity has long been regarded as a hallmark—even a trademark—feature of modernist narrative technique, with the stream-of-consciousness being perhaps the most well known example and Henry James generally hailed as its earliest English-language practitioner. According to this conventional account, the modernist novel emerged as a deliberate contrast to the panoramic social realism of its hefty Victorian predecessor, following James’s example to become more “psychological” or “subjective” in its orientation and adopting a more “poetic” or “lyrical” style to represent the vicissitudes of interiority, the life of the mind, and the workings of consciousness. While some critical efforts have been made to nuance this account, the vast majority do so either by focusing on the psychological dimensions of the nineteenth-century novel, typically in a way that underscores the genre’s ethical

imperatives, or by choosing to foreground the material and socio-political aspects of modernism, frequently at the expense of its concern with psychic experience as such. In “Reading Between the Minds,” I demonstrate how the formal techniques pioneered by Robert Browning in the dramatic monologue, generally considered Victorian poetry’s “flagship genre,” generate a new, implicit relationship between text and reader that, in turn, inflects modernist prose fiction’s generic experiments with the philosophical and representational questions raised by intersubjectivity. I examine the relationship between Browning and James in depth and analyze several of the latter’s rarely studied tales, reviews, and essays in this context. In the process, I show how Browning—both as an other mind in his own right and as he rendered other minds in his verse—influenced the development of narrative perspective across James’s œuvre, an evolution that reaches fullest and most recognizably modernist expression in the interpersonal convolutions of late novels like *The Wings of the Dove*. At the same time, I consider how, for both Browning and James, intersubjectivity emerges out of a preoccupation with aesthetic objects from the historical past, from letters to portraits to statues.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What we forgot, when we deified reason, was  
not that reason is incompatible with feeling, but  
that knowledge requires acknowledgment.

—Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge  
in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987)

Writing this dissertation has not been easy for me. Much of the problem, fittingly enough, has been other minds, for to write criticism is by definition to engage with other minds—authors, scholars, readers—and thus inevitably to invite criticism as well. Simply put, I have found the former wildly exhilarating and the latter frequently debilitating.

First and foremost, I offer sincere thanks to my advisor, Professor Douglas Mao, for his patience and steadfastness throughout the entirety of what seemed to both of us at times an interminable process. Next, I want to thank my second reader, Professor Andrew H. Miller, who joined the project at a late stage but whose influence extends farther back in the sense that his work stimulated my thinking on the topic years ago. I would also like to thank Professors Jean McGarry and Mary Jo Salter of The Writing Seminars, Professor Ruth Leys of the Humanities Center, and Visiting Professor Isobel Armstrong, for their help in conceiving the project. This also seems like an appropriate moment to express my thanks to several of the teachers who inspired and influenced me during earlier stages of my education: Professor Elizabeth Tallent and Dr. Alice Staveley at Stanford; Professor Ann Wierda Rowland at Harvard; and the late Professor Sally Ledger at Birkbeck.

For sharing her infectious laughter and incomparable—even indomitable—sense of humor from the earliest days of coursework through the darkest hours of self-doubt, I

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AP</i>	<i>The Aspern Papers</i>
“BWA”	“Browning in Westminster Abbey”
EBB	Elizabeth Barrett Browning
“ES”	“Essay on Shelley”
HJ	Henry James
“IA”	Review of <i>The Inn Album</i>
<i>Letters of HJ</i>	<i>The Letters of Henry James</i>
<i>Life of HJ</i>	<i>The Life of Henry James</i>
“LM”	“A Light Man”
“M”	“Memorabilia”
“MS-B”	“The Method of Sainte-Beuve”
“NRB”	“The Novel in <i>The Ring and the Book</i> ”
RB	Robert Browning
“SM”	“The Story of a Masterpiece”

## **PART I.**

### **BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS**

## INTRODUCTION

### **“Multiplied Consciousness”: Intersubjectivity in History and Theory**

In the conclusion to his controversial 1873 essay collection *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Walter Pater laments the perceptual constraints of what he calls “the narrow chamber of the individual mind.” “Experience,” he writes, “already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without.”<sup>1</sup> For Pater, discrete subjectivity is akin to solitary confinement: he likens the mind of “the individual in his isolation” to “a solitary prisoner in its own dream of a world” and accordingly implores his readers to cast off the shackles of solipsism in order to embrace emotions and experiences capable of yielding what he calls the “fruit of a quickened, *multiplied* consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> With this dramatic injunction to live expansively, the conclusion draws to a close, and it remains maddeningly unclear what it actually would mean for consciousness to *be* “multiplied” in the way that Pater advocates. In his brief, ambiguous, yet vitally important evocation, the concept seems to function at once metaphorically and literally. What, readers are left to wonder, would a “multiplied consciousness” look or feel like? Moreover, how—particularly given Pater’s evidently skeptical view of the individual mind as a kind of closed cabinet—might such a form of consciousness be accessed or achieved?

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Pater, 119, 121 (emphasis added).

Fortunately, Pater's earlier description of the process of cultural evolution in the volume's preface goes some way toward addressing these questions. There he contrasts the culture that emerges from minds working in "intellectual isolation" and moving "from different starting points, and by unconnected roads" with that produced when, as he puts it, "the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont" and even "catch light and heat" from one another. The extraordinary passage reads as follows:

The various forms of intellectual activity which together make up the culture of an age move for the most part from different starting points, and by unconnected roads. As products of the same generation they partake indeed of a common character, and unconsciously illustrate each other; but of the producers themselves, each group is solitary, gaining what advantage or disadvantage there may be in intellectual isolation. Art and poetry, philosophy and the religious life, . . . are each of them confined to its own circle of ideas, and those who prosecute either of them are generally little curious of the thoughts of others. There come, however, from time to time, eras of more favorable conditions, in which the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont, and the many interests of the intellectual world combine in one complete type of general culture. . . . Here, artists and philosophers and those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen, do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts. There is a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate . . . and it is to this intimate alliance with mind . . . that the art of Italy in the fifteenth century owes much of its grave dignity and influence.<sup>3</sup>

Pater's eloquence and vehemence imbue his remarks with an authoritativeness that makes it easy to overlook the fact that he did not live during the Italian Renaissance—in other words, that his moving, fervent description of the bygone age is to a significant degree conjectural, based on a deep appreciation of the works of da Vinci and Michelangelo, to be sure, but not on a personal acquaintance with the artists themselves. And yet reading his impassioned description of this era when men's thoughts converged such that "the

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<sup>3</sup> Pater, 6.

many interests of the intellectual world combine[d] in one complete type of general culture,” one cannot help but be struck by what seems like Pater’s conviction that he *does* know them intimately. This is fitting: it is as though the thermal energy with which Pater endows the artists and thinkers of the earlier period has been conducted down through the centuries to ignite his prose.

The tonal and imagistic trajectory of the preface—from a lament about isolation and solitude to a celebration of camaraderie and communication—mirrors that which we have already seen in the conclusion to Pater’s *Renaissance*. I want to open my study of the literary emergence of intersubjectivity in the latter half of the nineteenth century by suggesting that this image of a chain reaction in which one individual’s thoughts kindle those of another, which in turn illuminate others, and so on, embodies the same notion latent in Pater’s later evocation of “multiplied consciousness.” Indeed, Pater is clear in attributing the phenomenon to an “intimate alliance with mind.” His use of the singular “mind” is significant, for—like “multiplied consciousness”—it reinforces the sense of a collective mental entity, a cerebral unity formed by incorporating discrete minds without eradicating their fundamental separateness.

In this respect, Pater’s stirring evocation of the Renaissance ethos of intellectual and artistic communion resonates with the notion of intersubjectivity elaborated at the *fin de siècle* by the German philosopher and founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> While I have chosen to begin my discussion of intersubjectivity with Edmund Husserl, who is credited with having introduced the term (German, *intersubjektivität*) into philosophical discourse, it must be noted that the concept arguably emerged nearly a century earlier, in his predecessor G. W. F. Hegel’s 1807 work *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There Hegel argued that self-consciousness is a function of recognition; in other words, that an individual becomes aware of his own mind as an entity as a consequence of perceiving that other minds exist which seem to be capable of the same kind of acknowledgement. For Hegel’s extensive reasoning on the subject, see *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 104-38. Philosophers today are divided about whether Hegelian recognition constitutes a version of Husserlian intersubjectivity. Both this debate and the distinctions on which it is predicated, however, fall

Husserl's phenomenological method, the epoché and reduction, aimed to rid philosophy of presuppositions by bracketing the external world—that is, by relinquishing any and all assumptions about the existence of entities outside the self—in order to focus on giving a pure description of the immanent experience of consciousness. For Husserl, the concept of intersubjectivity designates the manner of experience made possible by the awareness of the existence of other consciousnesses; that is, a sense of being one ego among many, living in a world in which one's subjective experiences are mediated by the relationship they bear to the subjective experiences of others. According to Husserl, being with others naturally results in “a *universal super-addition of sense to [the individual ego's] primordial world.*” In *Cartesian Meditations* (1929), he writes:

This constitution . . . is essentially such that the “others”-for-me do not remain isolated; on the contrary, an *Ego-community*, which includes me, becomes constituted . . . as a community of Egos existing with each other and for each other—*ultimately a community of monads*, which, moreover, (in its communalized intentionality) constitutes the *one identical world*.<sup>5</sup>

According to Husserl's phenomenology, consciousness both creates *and* is created by the “communalization” of individual egos around the shared experience of an object, leading to what he calls the “transcendental ‘we.’”<sup>6</sup> For Husserl, in other words, consciousness is

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beyond the scope of my investigation here. For an overview of the controversy and the differences between the Hegelian and Husserlian positions, see Nick Crossley, *Intersubjectivity: The Fabric of Social Becoming* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 1-10, 16-23. Such disputes aside, the general consensus is that Hegel's emphasis on the structures of hegemonic power—as evidenced, most notably, in his account of the master-slave dialectic—makes his work more relevant to groups than to individuals. Since my interest, like that of the writers I consider, lies in interpersonal—and usually dyadic—relations, Husserl offers a natural starting point for this project, both from a conceptual perspective as well as a historical and semantic one. I would be remiss not to acknowledge, however, that many of the prominent critical theorists I examine in this chapter whose works address the topic of intersubjectivity, from Martin Heidegger and Jürgen Habermas to Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, view themselves as responding to Hegel.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (1929), trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 107.

<sup>6</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 107.

transcendental, extending beyond itself in order to constitute the world. Accordingly, in philosophic circles, his phenomenology is referred to as “constitutive” in nature.

For Husserl, intersubjectivity provides a vital grounding for the world; it is a form of mediation between the transcendental ego and communal experience. The concept is integral to his philosophical method, and he defines it, sometimes referring to it as “we-subjectivity,” as the condition in which “we, in living together . . . also function together, in the manifold ways of considering, together, objects pregiven to us in common, thinking together, valuing, planning, acting together.”<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Husserl maintains, not without controversy, that such “*intentional communion*”—a process which he regards as producing “an essentially *unique connectedness*” and “*mutual being for one another*”—does *not* undermine individual subjectivity; on the contrary, he insists, “each monad is an absolutely separate unity.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, as one commentator notes, for Husserl the condition of “[i]ntersubjectivity is something an ego enters into through its experience of others, and it only exists where a multiplicity of egos *remain distinct* despite their coming into a complex—even harmonious—relation to each other.” By this account, “[t]here is no sense . . . in which intersubjectivity dissipates the individual consciousness or compromises its singularity,” and in this respect what Husserl terms intersubjectivity can be seen as akin to what Pater calls “multiplied consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

Husserl’s insistence on the fundamentally monadic nature of the subject leaves his phenomenology vulnerable to the critique that intersubjectivity is ultimately reducible to solipsism. After all, if the object of a given experience is always already inseparable from

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (1954; repr., Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 129.

<sup>9</sup> Matheson Russell, *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 168-69.



the impressions of the subject, then the experience itself would seem to have an inherent perceptual bias. Along the same lines, Husserl's methodological insistence on bracketing anything beyond consciousness leaves his phenomenology open to allegations of idealism as well as questions of skepticism. These objections, as we will see, have been important to subsequent attempts to theorize intersubjectivity, yet Husserl would argue that they are irrelevant because they are built into intersubjectivity as he conceives it. In other words, for Husserl, uncertainty regarding the existence of entities outside of the self/mind is an inevitable—and crucial—facet of intersubjective experience.

Husserl's complex phenomenology evolved over the course of his career, and it is not my intention here to plumb its depths or question its precepts. Rather, I want to show how his concept of intersubjectivity—of consciousness as transcendental and constituted in relation to others—finds roughly contemporaneous literary expression in the works of Robert Browning and Henry James. Husserl was influenced by the philosophy of William James, Henry's elder brother, whose account of how human beings experience the world seems to have an implicit intersubjective basis. In William James's account in *Principles of Psychology* (1890), it is through agreement with other minds about "the same object" that one individual's thought becomes "cognitive of an outer reality."<sup>10</sup> Thus, despite its apparent etymological emphasis on subjectivity (*inter* [between] + subjective), then, intersubjectivity can be understood as taking place between subjective perception and objective fact. Whenever the subjective experience of one individual mind encounters the

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<sup>10</sup> William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), 2 vol. (New York: Dover, 1950), 1:272. It was this work by William that made famous the metaphor of consciousness as stream, a notion that has been crucial to understandings of modernist narrative technique. The relevant passage reads as follows: "Consciousness . . . does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. . . . It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" (1:239).

subjective experience of another mind, it becomes objectified in the sense of having its existence confirmed to itself. In this sense, there is no objectivity without subjectivity. Remarkably, this remains the case when the other mind disputes the particularities of the shared event, or even denies the meaning the first individual has attached to it.

The *OED* credits the psychologist and philosopher James Ward's *Naturalism and Agnosticism* (1899) with the first use of "intersubjective" in English and defines the term as "existing between *conscious* minds," perhaps following Ward's example.<sup>11</sup> Since this dissertation focuses on the work of two Anglo-American writers, it is interesting to note that the word entered the English lexicon at this time. Nevertheless, the definition offered by the *OED* is not entirely suitable for my purposes since, by stipulating consciousness as a prerequisite for intersubjectivity, it raises the question of what consciousness entails, a critical inquiry at this period. (In his later work, Husserl, who had been a fellow student of Sigmund Freud in Franz Brentano's psychology class, recognized the unconscious as an important dimension of mental life.) As we will see, the problem of intersubjectivity has been tied to questions of consciousness virtually since its inception; indeed, it is fair to say that the role of the conscious mind is crucial to the set of thematic concerns that are designated by the term intersubjectivity. The recently updated manual of the American Psychoanalytic Association poses the following list of ongoing research questions:

Is [intersubjectivity] restricted to what is conscious, or does it include unconscious processes? Is it asymmetrical, or one-way, or is it always bi-directional? Is intersubjectivity about understanding or about feeling? Is it verbal or nonverbal?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Intersubjective," s.v. *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, emphasis added. The *OED* gives the earliest recorded instances of the adverb ("intersubjectively") and the noun ("intersubjectivity") as 1934 and 1938, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> "Intersubjectivity," s.v., *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, ed. Elizabeth L. Auchincloss and Eslee Samberg (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2012), 122.

Such questions, as I will argue, animated first the poetry of Robert Browning and later the fiction of Henry James, giving rise to an essential but hitherto underappreciated strand of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature animated by a fascination with the possibilities and problems of intersubjective experience. In other words, I aim to provide an account of the *literary* history of intersubjectivity and to show how, at roughly the same time that Husserl coined the term, Browning and James were grappling with the same issue.

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In Husserl's description of intersubjective experience as what takes place when "*a community of monads . . . constitutes the one identical world,*" we can discern an echo of Pater's remark about the extraordinary concatenation of circumstances by which "many interests . . . combine in one complete type of general culture." What Pater's account of the Italian Renaissance leaves out—but what the resonance of his work with Husserl, William James, and others highlights—is that his own era had much in common with the one he describes: a time of "intimate alliance with mind" (and, furthermore, *with respect to mind*); a moment when the "general culture" was one of fascination with interior life; and an age deeply concerned with how two individuals might "catch the light and heat from each other's thoughts." Mark S. Michale stresses the point in his preface to *The Mind of Modernism* (2004), an anthology based on papers delivered at a 1995 conference at Yale University. He writes:

[T]he *sciences of the mind* in particular bear special affinities to the cultural arts, and arguably at no time were these affinities more

intimate and intricate and consequential than during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. . . . [T]hese were decades of astonishing fertility and creativity, decades that witnessed both the burgeoning of psychological and psychiatric knowledge and the burst of creative energy in the arts and philosophy that we designate retrospectively as cultural and artistic Modernism. . . . [T]his coincidence of chronology is not happenstance. . . . [T]he extraordinary range and depth of interactions between these different arenas of human inquiry and expression . . . [suggest that] . . . a kind of comprehensive psychologization of culture, permeating virtually all branches of the creative life of the mind, occurred in the European West a century ago.<sup>13</sup>

Michale reiterates what has become the conventional account of the emergence of the modernist novel, a version that has been propagated in various forms since the mid-twentieth-century publication of Leon Edel's influential work *The Psychological Novel, 1900-1950*.<sup>14</sup> In an echo of Virginia Woolf's well-known proclamation that "on or about December, 1910, human character changed," Edel contends that, "between 1913 and 1915, was born the modern psychological novel—what we have come to call, in English letters, the stream-of-consciousness novel or the novel of the silent, the internal monologue, and, in French letters, the modern analytic novel[.]"<sup>15</sup> Basing his argument on the early works of Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson, and James Joyce, Edel goes on

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<sup>13</sup> Mark S. Micale, ed., *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004), viii.

<sup>14</sup> Edel's work was first published with this title in 1955. When it was revised and reprinted in softcover half a dozen years later, in 1961, the author renamed it *The Modern Psychological Novel*. In a testament to the volume's impact, another edition was published in 1964, along with a new introduction in which Edel declares: "[I]f it were possible to rename this book without creating the impression that I had written a new one, I would call it *Modes of Subjectivity in the Modern Novel*" (v). I have elected to cite an imprint of the last version, whose title remains the same although it has been expanded significantly to contain more of Edel's "observations on the continuing experiments in fictional subjectivity at mid-century," including discussions of C. P. Snow, Lawrence Durrell, Conrad Aiken, Arthur Miller, and the French *nouveau roman* (vii). See Edel, *The Modern Psychological Novel*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, ed. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1988), 26. Woolf's piece was delivered first as a lecture before a Cambridge audience in 1924 and was published in the collection *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* in 1950. Interestingly, 1910, the year that Woolf designates as transformative for the development of human character, happens to be the same year that Husserl began to explore the topic of intersubjectivity in depth in his lecture "Basic Problems of Phenomenology."

to describe what he views as their common narrative project in language that reverberates with that used by both Pater and Micale:

This was a *coincidence* indeed—that three writers, *unknown to each other*, three distinctly different talents and temperaments, should, *at the same time*, have turned fiction away from external to internal reality, from the outer world that Balzac had charted a century before to the hidden world of fantasy and reverie into which there play constantly the life and perception of our senses. There were striking similarities in these works. . . . They seemed to be essentially autobiographical. They contained an unusual infusion of the language of poetry. Their very titles suggested . . . *a curious kinship* of search, voyage, pilgrimage. Indeed, all were voyages through consciousness. . . . These novelists sought to retain a record the “inwardness” of experience.<sup>16</sup>

In Edel’s discussion of the “striking similarities” of these “distinctly different” writers, one can hear the flare of the match as they, in Pater’s words, “catch the light and heat from each other’s thoughts.”

Drawing on the work of William James, to whom he erroneously attributes the first use of the term “stream of consciousness,” Edel offers what quickly became—and has largely remained—the standard account of the project of the modernist novel, and the high modernist novel especially, as representing interior life of the mind.<sup>17</sup> He writes:

It was an attempt in a more minute and thorough fashion than ever before to document the whole world of the senses and to catch fugitive thoughts in their progress through the mind . . . in their very moment of flow. . . to find words that would convey elusive and evanescent thought: not only the words that come to the mind, but the images of the inner world of fantasy, fusing with sounds and smells, the world of perceptual experience.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Edel, *The Modern Psychological Novel*, 11-12 (emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> In *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850-1880* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), Rick Rylance shows that in fact George Henry Lewes had used the metaphor in *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859) some thirty years earlier. According to Rylance, Lewes’s original use of the metaphor, with its emphasis on physicality, “suggests something both richer and more complicated than later redactions,” even “the pure liquidity of [William] James’s ‘mentalist’ image” (11).

<sup>18</sup> Edel, *Modern Psychological Novel*, 16.

This effort to “to find words that would convey elusive and evanescent thought,” as Edel explains, resulted in “an unusual infusion of the language of poetry” into prose narrative. In this vein, conventional accounts of the emergence of the modernist fiction stress that, as a result of its concern with subjectivity and consciousness, the novel becomes more lyrical in this period. Such accounts identify the modernist novel’s chief preoccupation as the representation of interiority, what William James described as “*the stream of thought, or of consciousness, or of subjective life.*”<sup>19</sup> According to this received model of literary history, “the moderns tried to ‘make it new’ by trading the novel’s regular forms for experimental forms of flux, perplexity, openness, skepticism, freedom, and horror,”—in short, with forms more conducive to rendering “the streams and flows of interior psychic life.”<sup>20</sup> The crucial role played by Henry James is central to these received accounts of the development of modernist narrative technique. Perry Meisel succinctly summarizes the conventional view: “In fiction before James, the world predominates; in fiction after James, the mind predominates.”<sup>21</sup>

In *Thinking in Henry James*, Sharon Cameron powerfully challenges the view of James as writing “the psychological novel par excellence” on the grounds that his fiction instead “dissociates consciousness from psychology.”<sup>22</sup> It does so, she argues, by defying “the very representational boundaries (specifically the boundaries that restrict thoughts to minds) that up to that point had characterized the novel” and, she notes, have continued to shape critical views of the genre well into the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Cameron observes

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<sup>19</sup> W. James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1:239.

<sup>20</sup> Jesse Matz, “The Novel,” in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 215.

<sup>21</sup> Perry Meisel, “Psychology” in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Cameron, 21.

that James actively encourages this understanding of his project in the Prefaces to the New York Edition of his works, which he composed years, even decades, after the novels first appeared and which, according to Cameron, revise consciousness in a way that is incommensurate with its representation in the texts themselves. In the 1907 Preface to the 1875 novel *Roderick Hudson*, for instance, James declares the “center of interest” to be “in” the consciousness of a single character, Rowland Mallet, a contention he reiterates with respect to Isabel Archer, the heroine of his 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, in the 1908 Preface to that work.<sup>24</sup> Yet as Cameron demonstrates, the novels do not conform to James’s description. *Roderick Hudson*, she points out, undermines the notion of psychological integrity by inadequately differentiating between characters; hence the discrepancy between the work’s title and James’s assertion about whose consciousness is central. *The Portrait of a Lady* similarly represents Isabel’s thoughts as permeable rather than enclosed and autonomous. Thus, Cameron persuasively argues, whereas “James’s Prefaces psychologize the idea of consciousness by imagining it as centered, subjective, internal, and unitary,” effectively “stabiliz[ing] a connection between consciousness and the self by asserting that the self is where consciousness resides,” the novels do just the opposite: they portray consciousness as volatile and “disseminated,” located “not in

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<sup>24</sup> HJ, “Preface to the New York Edition” (1907), in *Roderick Hudson* (1875), ed. Geoffrey Moore (New York: Penguin, 1986), 45, emphasis added. James’s complete sentence reads as follows: “The center of interest throughout ‘Roderick’ is in Rowland Mallet’s consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness—which I had of course to make sufficiently acute in order to enable it, like a set or lighted scene, to hold the play” (45-46). His description of his narrative decision-making process in the Preface to *Portrait* similarly relies on “centres” and “satellites” of consciousness: “Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness, I said to myself, ‘and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish.’ Stick to *that*—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. . . . Place meanwhile in the other scale the lighter weight (which is usually the one that tips the balance of interest): press least hard, in short, on the consciousness of your heroine’s satellites, especially the male; make it an interest contributive only to the greater one.” HJ, “Preface to the New York Edition” (1908), in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-81), ed. Robert G. Bamberg (New York: Norton, 1995), 10-11.

persons but rather between them.” Consciousness, she concludes, “is reconceived as . . . an *intersubjective* phenomenon.”<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, intersubjectivity is an important term for Cameron, as it is for many other critics. Yet despite the term’s fairly widespread usage in scholarly writing during the past century, the concept itself has received very little detailed attention. Intersubjectivity, as I will show, is a highly specific and underappreciated part of identity formation and social relations. Moreover, it is a concept vital to both literary history and critical theory, having received extensive, but by no means exhaustive, attention from eminent literary theorists in particular. The reciprocal relations between author and reader contribute to the text’s intersubjective matrix, giving rise to a dynamism that has been explored by theorists using a diverse range of methods and approaches, from hermeneutics to reader-response and reception theory, to structuralism and the various incarnations of its aftermath. Indeed, though I will not pursue the claim as part of my argument here, I would say that the high modernist emphasis on subjective limitation—as a problem of consciousness and as a problem for the *representation* of consciousness—reverberates in twentieth-century literary criticism in a way that profoundly shaped the discipline as we know it. Before I begin my turning to Browning and James, therefore, I want to give a sketch of how the concept has evolved in the wake of Husserl.

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Broadly speaking, intersubjectivity may be said to have two philosophical strands. The first, which we can regard as the credulous strand, arguably commences with Husserl

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<sup>25</sup> Cameron, 77.



and extends to the present, perhaps most notably in the work of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. I have labeled this strand of the tradition “credulous” because, while not immune to idealist objections, it is nevertheless based on the conviction that genuine intersubjectivity—in the sense of mutuality or reciprocity of experience—is possible, whether via the act of communication in language, as Habermas argues, or some other non-linguistic, contextual means, perhaps even one embedded in brain function.<sup>26</sup> The second strand, which we can designate as the “incredulous” line of thought, maintains that intersubjectivity—to the extent that it can be said to exist at all—ultimately only highlights the incommensurability between subjects, their fundamental unknowability or opacity to one another. This tradition can be traced back to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and initially gained traction in Europe, especially France, where it was taken up, most famously, in the mid-twentieth century by the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Heidegger was Husserl’s doctoral student and chosen successor at the University of Freiburg. He modified Husserl’s phenomenology by making a forceful turn away from Western metaphysics, with its subjectivist tradition of understanding the individual as having a self/ego/consciousness. In his magnum opus *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger argued that humans are fundamentally situated in time and in relation to others. Staunch in the belief that philosophy had reached an impasse and needed to establish an ontology, Heidegger accordingly replaced the notion of the self with *Dasein*, a term he borrowed from Hegel to refer to the condition of being human in the sense of being shaped by one’s social and cultural environment. For Heidegger, the existence of *Dasein* amounts to

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<sup>26</sup> The concept of mirror neurons, while controversial, represents the entrance of neuroscience into the academic discourse surrounding intersubjectivity.

“being-in-the-world,” where the hyphens indicate a lack of distance from the world.

Whereas Husserl had argued that consciousness constitutes the world, according to Heidegger *Dasein* and the world are one and the same. Christian Ferencz-Flatz recently has suggested that though Heidegger is “ostensibly separated from the entire realm of debates concerning intersubjectivity,” perhaps due to his “idiosyncratic terminology”—like Hegel before him, Heidegger never made use of the word—his thought is closely linked to Husserlian phenomenology. As Ferencz-Flatz explains:

[F]or Heidegger intersubjectivity is not the belated accomplishment of an egological subject, but an ontological feature of the subject himself. By stating that the subject is not primarily a distinct individual, apart from others, but instead indistinctively a part of “them” . . . Heidegger . . . radically overthrow[s] the idea of the other’s “co-existence” by stating that in fact the subject himself is the first to “coexist.” Only because the *Dasein* himself is in the mode of *Mitsein*, can others coexist alongside him at *Mitdasein*.<sup>27</sup>

In this vein, in “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1933-34), Heidegger applied his critique of what he calls “[m]odern subjectivism,” the view that the individual self constitutes a distinct and “sovereign subject,” to the domain of creativity.<sup>28</sup> According to Heidegger, a work of art is more than a personal expression of the artist’s subjectivity or an aesthetic object for the perceiver’s contemplation; it is an event. As we will see, both this notion and Heidegger’s formulation of *Dasein* had important implications for critical theory.

Among those profoundly influenced by Heideggerian phenomenology was Sartre. While following Heidegger in certain respects, Sartre nevertheless countered his efforts to move beyond consciousness as a philosophical problem. In *Being and Nothingness*

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<sup>27</sup> Christian Ferencz-Flatz, “The Element of Intersubjectivity: Heidegger’s Early Conception of Empathy,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (2015): 480.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1933-34), in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 73.

(1943), written in response to *Being and Time*, Sartre elaborated his own theory of intersubjectivity based on the condition he called “being-for-others.” Contra Husserl, Sartre insisted that the ego or “I” resides outside of consciousness; in his view, self-consciousness must be seen as pre-reflective and non-relational. He elaborated a theory of the “divided subject,” based on unfulfilled desire, in which there is no possibility of intersubjective reciprocity. In particular, Sartre focused on the look, the experience he calls “being-seen-by-another.” Describing the deep anxiety and alienation we feel upon realizing that we are the object of another’s visual experience, Sartre writes:

If I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes . . . . This is because to perceive is to *look at*, and to apprehend a look is not to apprehend a look-as-object in the world (unless the look is not directed upon us); it is to be conscious of *being looked at*. The look which the *eyes* manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are, is a pure reference to myself. What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that *there is someone there*; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense—in short, that I *am seen*.<sup>29</sup>

Influenced by Sartre and building on his work, Maurice Merleau-Ponty expands upon the Husserlian notion of intersubjectivity in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) by insisting that the subject must be embodied. For Merleau-Ponty, that is, corporeality is a prerequisite for self-consciousness; moreover, the body is essential to our capacity to recognize other minds as such, since, by his reasoning, “other consciousnesses can be deduced only if the emotional expressions of others are compared with mine, and precise correlations recognized between my physical behavior and my ‘psychic events.’” By way of illustrating this point, Merleau-Ponty offers the following example:

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<sup>29</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 346-47.

A baby of fifteen months opens its mouth if I playfully take one of its fingers between my teeth and pretend to bite it. And yet it has scarcely looked at its face in a glass, and its teeth are not in any case like mine. The fact is that though its own mouth and teeth, as it feels them from the inside, are immediately, for it, an apparatus to bite with, and my jaw, as the baby sees it from the outside, is immediately, for it, capable of the same intentions. “Biting” has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance. It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body.<sup>30</sup>

“Between my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system,” Merleau-Ponty writes. A version of this kind of “dual being,” he alleges, occurs during the process of linguistic communication:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. . . . we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world.<sup>31</sup>

This marked something of a “linguistic turn” for intersubjectivity theory, a shift to focus on communication in language. The French linguist Émile Benveniste, interrogating the notion that words inherently are endowed with the potential to function as instruments of communication, ultimately concludes that “the condition of intersubjectivity alone . . . makes linguistic communication possible.”<sup>32</sup> Benveniste thus reframes intersubjectivity

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<sup>30</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Colin Smith (1962; repr., London: Routledge, 1996), 352.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 354.

<sup>32</sup> Émile Benveniste, “Subjectivity in Language,” in *Problems of General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971), 230.

as a matter of discourse, by which he means an utterance that is attributable to a subject and directed toward an object.

The relationship between language and intersubjectivity was theorized further by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Using Structuralist principles derived from the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strass, who had described what he regarded as a tribal form of intersubjectivity, Lacan argued that the subject is linguistically constituted. According to Lacan, the subject misrecognizes itself in the preverbal register of the Imaginary and thereby experiencing a fracturing that cannot be repaired. In Lacan's account, a subject can never express desire in language because language is inherited from others. For this reason, Lacan maintains that there is no possibility for genuine intersubjectivity. As he put it in one of his famous lectures, "[T]he register of truth . . . is situated at the very foundation of intersubjectivity. It is located there where the subject can grasp nothing but the very subjectivity which constitutes an Other as absolute."<sup>33</sup>

Lacan's psychoanalytic intervention in the hitherto predominately philosophical discussion of intersubjectivity resulted in the concept's taking a further linguistic turn, a shift that situated it *outside* of monadic consciousness, in the realm of communication in language, with all its *unconscious* dimensions. The 1950s and 1960s saw a burgeoning of interest in the concept, partly due to the rise of existential psychoanalysis.<sup>34</sup> A key figure

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<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 35. Lacan first offered his Structuralist interpretation of Poe's story in the mid-1950s. It was published in *Écrits* in 1966. The English translation appeared in 1972.

<sup>34</sup> It is admittedly controversial to assert that intersubjectivity was primarily a philosophical concern until the mid-twentieth-century. As pioneered by Sigmund Freud, the field of psychoanalysis arguably had been exploring the topic of intersubjectivity virtually from its inception in the sense that it was interested in how the self relates to the other. To be sure, Freud's early work, with its reliance on mesmerism and hypnotism, certainly raised questions about the power of one mind over another. His emphasis on the importance of the transference between patient and analyst similarly involved the psychic experience of *two* minds in relation to one another. So too, did his later work on the formation of the individual ego through early-childhood

in this movement was the Scottish analyst and writer R. D. Laing, whose controversial work on schizoid and schizophrenic individuals was imbued with strains of Husserlian phenomenology and its Heideggerian modification. In works like *The Divided Self* (1960), *Self and Other* (1961), and *Interpersonal Perception* (1966), Laing argues that selfhood is to a significant extent determined by interpersonal relations. He declares:

Personal relatedness can exist only between beings who are separate but who are not isolates. We are not isolates and we are not parts of the same physical body. Here we have the paradox, that our relatedness to others is an essential aspect of our *being*, as is our separateness, but any particular person is not a necessary part of our being.<sup>35</sup>

Eventually, intersubjectivity gained acceptance even within psychoanalytic circles that initially had opposed phenomenology due to what was viewed as its challenge to the Freudian unconscious. Indeed, at present intersubjectivity enjoys its greatest conceptual traction in the field of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, where it has been appropriated for

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relationships and later social interactions. As Freud himself acknowledged, “[O]nly rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is Individual Psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent, and so from the very first Individual Psychology is . . . Social Psychology as well” (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* [1921], in vol. 18 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 26 vol., trans. James Strachey [London: Hogarth Press, 1955], 69). Nevertheless, Freud never used the term “intersubjectivity” and it remains difficult to reconcile traditional ego psychology, with an intersubjective orientation, though steps are being made in this direction with the rise of so-called interpersonal psychoanalysis and its slightly later counterpart, relational psychoanalysis. The foundational text of the interpersonal school is Harry Stack Sullivan’s *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1953), which, although it preceded Laing’s works, does not use the word “intersubjectivity” and hence has been relegated to a footnote in this discussion. For an overview of the relationship between relational psychoanalysis and traditional Freudian approaches, see Stephen A. Mitchell and Lewis Aron, eds., *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition* (Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (1960; repr., New York: Pantheon, 1969), 25. See also Laing, *Self and Others* (London: Tavistock, 1961); and Laing, H. Phillipson, and A. R. Lee, *Interpersonal Perception: A Theory and Method of Research* (London: Tavistock, 1966). Note that, in part due to his controversial methods, Laing is not credited with having introduced the term to psychoanalytic discourse. Instead, this distinction belongs to George Stolorow and Robert Atwood’s *Faces in a Cloud: Subjectivity in Personality Theory* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1979).

use by the so-called relational school in particular.<sup>36</sup> The 2013 edition of *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* offers the following definition:

1) the dynamic emotional and psychological interaction of two (or more) different persons, each with their own subjective experience of themselves, each other, and the interactions between them; intersubjectivity includes the idea that this dynamic interaction is best understood by examining the contributions of each person's subjective experience; and 2) the capacity to understand, feel, participate in, and share the subjective experience of another person.<sup>37</sup>

In the first part of the twentieth century, Husserlian phenomenology extended into the realm of aesthetics as theorists began to emphasize a more participatory relationship to works of art. At the time, literary studies was grappling with the biographical fallacy and beginning to question the entrenched practice of interpreting texts predominately as a reflection of their author's lives. This was a radical shift: since its initial emergence as a discipline in the mid-nineteenth century—thanks in large degree to the prolific French reviewer Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, whom we will discuss in the next chapter—literary criticism had been almost synonymous with the biographical method. A group of critics that became known as the Geneva School began to alter this paradigm on the basis of an essentially intersubjective relationship between author and reader. For these critics, the moment of textual encounter is primary; the author's importance stems not from his role as a historical personage so much as from his manifest consciousness, which

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<sup>36</sup> This is not without controversy. Some analysts object to intersubjectivity on the grounds that it implicitly critiques Freud's classical approach to working with patients, while others contend that it is consistent with such key Freudian notions as transference and counter-transference.

<sup>37</sup> "Intersubjectivity," s.v., *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, 121. The entry goes on to explain that, in current psychoanalytic thought, the intersubjective point of view includes the following assumptions: "1) An urge toward intersubjectivity, intimacy, or a feeling of intersubjective orientation, is a basic and irreducible force within the mind, while intersubjective disorientation results in anxiety. 2) Many important mental structures, capacities and functions are best understood as having their basis in intersubjectivity, including motivation, defense, empathy, identity, identification, superego, object, self-reflective consciousness, and the self, to mention a few. 3) Intersubjectivity contributes to the capacity for falling in love, feelings of intimacy and belonging, successful parenting, and effective participation in groups" (122).

continues to live in the work so long as the work is read. In this vein, Georges Poulet, a leader of the Geneva School, contends that “so long as it is animated by . . . the act of reading, a work of literature becomes . . . a sort of human being” in its own right. The text, Poulet argues, possesses “a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in [the reader] as the subject of its own objects.”<sup>38</sup> In Poulet’s account, the experience of reading sounds coercive, like a form of mind-control in which the author imposes thoughts upon the reader, who in turn surrenders to the authorial consciousness, thereby compromising his or her individual subjectivity. Poulet describes the experience of being a reader from his own viewpoint:

Whatever I think is a part of *my* mental world. And yet here I am thinking a thought which manifestly belongs to another mental world, which is being thought in me just as though I did not exist. Already the notion is inconceivable and seems even more so if I reflect that, since every thought must have a subject to think it, this *thought* which is alien to me and yet in me, must also have in me a *subject* which is alien to me. . . . Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an *I*, and yet the *I* which I pronounce is not myself.

Therefore, the reading process, Poulet proclaims, “My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another.”<sup>39</sup> Poulet’s account of reading, though compelling in many respects, is dependent on two impossible conditions: the life of the author must be bracketed from the work entirely, and so too must be the personality of the reader.

Roman Ingarden, a doctoral student of Husserl, also extended a version of his mentor’s phenomenology into the realm of aesthetics.<sup>40</sup> Though deeply influenced by Husserl in certain respects, Ingarden nevertheless rejected transcendental idealism and

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<sup>38</sup> Georges Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” *New Literary History* 1 (1969): 59. Note how Poulet’s description of reading evokes Hegelian self-consciousness: “Such is the characteristic condition of every work which I summon back into existence by placing my consciousness at its disposal. I give it not only existence, but awareness of existence” (59).

<sup>39</sup> Poulet, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Ingarden’s dissertation on intellect and intuition in the work of Henri Bergson was directed by Husserl.



looked to art to resolve the phenomenological opposition between objects that are real (in the sense of being universally determinate) and those that are ideal (in the sense of being autonomous). Works of art, according to Ingarden, do not belong definitively to either category; instead, he argues, they have a special status, which he calls an “intersubjective life,” a multi-faceted existence that depends on both the creator and the perceiver(s).<sup>41</sup> In *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1937), Ingarden describes the conditions that give rise to this kind of intersubjective life:

The literary work as such is a purely intentional formation which has the source of its being in the creative acts of consciousness of its author and its physical foundation in the text set down in writing or through other physical means of possible reproduction . . . By virtue of the dual stratum of its language, the work is both intersubjectively accessible and reproducible, so that it becomes an intersubjective intentional object, related to a community of readers. As such it is not a psychological phenomenon and is transcendent to all experiences of consciousness, those of the author as well as those of the reader.<sup>42</sup>

The German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser objects to Ingarden’s account of the reading process on the grounds that it is not reciprocal and therefore ultimately not intersubjective: “Ingarden is referring to a one-way incline from text to reader and not a two-way relationship,” he writes.<sup>43</sup> Iser likewise disputes Poulet’s argument that reading involves *identification* with the author’s consciousness. Iser argues that while the reader’s “individuality temporarily recedes into the background,” it is not wholly “supplanted” by

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<sup>41</sup> See Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* (1965), trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 331-55.

<sup>42</sup> Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1937), trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 14.

<sup>43</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, trans. Iser (1976; repr., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), 173. Richard Macksey—who, with his wife, Catherine, translated much of Poulet’s work from French to English—disputes Iser’s contention and instead argues that Poulet viewed the relationship between author and reader as “intersubjective,” a collaborative process unfolding “between consciousnesses” (“The Consciousness of the Critic: Georges Poulet and the Reader’s Share,” in *Velocities of Change: Critical Essays from MLN*, ed. Macksey [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974], 308-9).

the “alien thoughts” on the page. What happens, according to Iser, is an “artificial division” in the reader’s consciousness:

For although we may be thinking the thoughts of someone else, what we are will not disappear completely—it will merely remain a more or less powerful virtual force. Thus, in reading there are these two levels—the alien “me” and the real, virtual “me”—which are never completely cut off from each other.<sup>44</sup>

In *The Act of Reading* (1976), Iser sets out to establish the grounds for a critical-theoretical paradigm capable of “facilitate[ing] intersubjective discussion of individual interpretations.”<sup>45</sup> For Iser, the central task of a theory of aesthetic response is to “open up an intersubjective means of access to our value judgments,” for which, in his view, the conventional “subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy” is unable provide satisfactory account. “How,” Iser asks rhetorically, “can value judgments be so subjective if they are based on such objective criteria?” He cites the disagreement between C. S. Lewis and F. R. Leavis over *Paradise Lost*, in which the former declared that the problem was not that the two critics saw different things when they looked at the text, but rather that what one man saw and hated, the other saw and loved. For Iser, this is significant because it suggests Lewis and Leavis arrived at “totally different conclusions” about Milton’s epic on the basis of “identical criteria,” and Iser therefore concludes that “the act of comprehension itself is obviously intersubjective[.]” He then posits an answer to his own earlier question:

The reason may be that a literary text contains intersubjectively verifiable instructions for meaning-production, but the meaning produced may then lead to a whole variety of different experiences and hence subjective judgments. Thus by ridding ourselves of the concept of subjectivism/objectivism we can establish an

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<sup>44</sup> Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, trans. Iser (1972; repr., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), 293.

<sup>45</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, x.

intersubjective frame of reference that will enable us to assess the otherwise ineluctable subjectivity of the value judgments.<sup>46</sup>

Such an “intersubjective frame of reference,” we will see in Chapter 2, is essential to the technology of the dramatic monologue. Clearly, it is also crucial to Iser’s formulation of reader-response theory, which, as he himself acknowledges, assumes that “the subjective processing of a text is still accessible to third parties, i.e., available for intersubjective analysis.”<sup>47</sup> Iser’s consistent use of the word “intersubjectivity”—he refers to interpretations as being “intersubjectively valid” and “intersubjectively accessible,” and to texts as producing “intersubjective consensus” through their inherently “intersubjective character”—indicates the importance of the concept to his work.<sup>48</sup>

In the preface to the second edition of *The Disappearance of God*, a study whose method clearly owes much to Poulet’s influence, J. Hillis Miller reflects on his early-career Geneva School phase and its impact on his subsequent critical development. While allowing that he still concurs with the basic assumption underlying Poulet’s approach—namely the sense “that criticism is an act of reading, an allegory or figure for reading,” one whose goal “is to get inside” the text so as “to convey as intimate a sense as possible of what goes on there”—Miller also makes a point of emphasizing that he no longer believes such intimacy must “be defined as the identification of the mind of the critic with the mind of the author.” “Nor,” he continues, does he remain “sure that the aim of criticism is properly to be described as the most exact delineation of the consciousness of the author.” Miller’s remarks highlight both why other minds have been regarded as a “problem” in philosophy and why they can be seen as presenting a difficulty for literary

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<sup>46</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 49.

<sup>48</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 122-124, 222. Iser goes on to make reference to the “intersubjective structure of meaning assembly (151) as well as the “intersubjective communication of a meaning” (230).

studies: by drawing attention to the limitation inherent in critical endeavor—and, more generally, attendant upon the practice of reading itself—the doctrine of skepticism also calls into question the interpretive validity of these acts. “Each genuine act of criticism,” Miller writes, “like each act of reading, is to a considerable degree unique and to a considerable degree lonely.”<sup>49</sup> Still, he notes, despite the solitary activity’s apparent solipsism:

There can be no doubt that the act of reading gives the reader the powerful sense that he is encountering, through the words, *another mind*. Terms descriptive of consciousness and interpersonal relations may be indispensable to criticism. It could be, nevertheless, that all these securities are based on a *fiction*. They may be based, that is, on a *figurative transference* of terms from psychology and social relations to the realm of literature. Such terms may apply in literature not literally but by an “as if.” When we read a novel by Trollope or a poem by Browning it is “as if” we were encountering another mind or knowing another mind from within. It may be that the “consciousness of the author” is an illusion or phantasm generated by the words on the page. This phantasm may have nothing necessarily to do with the actual mind of the person who once put those words down on paper. This is a familiar notion now in discussions of the “narrator” in prose fiction, but it may have a wider relevance. Consciousness, in literature at least, may be a function of language, a fictive appearance generated by language, rather than something language describes or reflects.<sup>50</sup>

Here Miller draws attention to the subject-object dichotomy inherent in reader-response theory: although the subject/reader might come away from the text with a “powerful sense” of having “encounter[ed] . . . another mind,” this perceived other is always to some extent an “illusion or phantasm,” one that may bear little or even no resemblance to “the actual mind” responsible for the text’s creation. To put it in the terms used by

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<sup>49</sup> J. Hillis Miller, preface to *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*, 2nd. rev. ed. (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), viii.

<sup>50</sup> J. Hillis Miller, preface to *The Disappearance of God*, viii-ix (emphasis added).

Wayne Booth, the point is that a single text will have as many different incarnations of the Implied Author as it has readers.<sup>51</sup>

In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas calls for rethinking the entire project of critical theory along intersubjective lines:

[T]he rational core of mimetic achievements can be laid open only if we give up the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness—namely, a subject that represents objects and toils with them—in favour of the paradigm of linguistic philosophy—namely, that of intersubjective understanding or communication—and puts the cognitive-instrumental aspect of reason in its proper place as part of a more encompassing communicative rationality.<sup>52</sup>

In this spirit, intersubjectivity continues to play an important, if not fully articulated, role in recent work in literary studies. The term hovers, for instance, throughout Amanda Anderson's *The Way We Argue Now* (2006), a critical-theoretical intervention that announces itself as a “renewed assessment” of Habermas’s work with the goal of showing how his “interrelated theories of communicative action, discourse ethics, and democratic proceduralism” function to “promote an understanding of reflective distance as an achieved and lived practice[.]”<sup>53</sup> According to Anderson, Habermas’s theory of communicative ethics is a “reformulation of Kantian ethical universalism,” one that aims “to retrieve an emancipatory model of *communicative* reason derived from a linguistic understanding of intersubjective relations.”<sup>54</sup> By Anderson’s account, cosmopolitanism, with its efforts to “foster reciprocal and transformative encounters between strangers variously construed . . . partakes of the same intersubjective turn with regard to liberal

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<sup>51</sup> See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), 71-76.

<sup>52</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vol., trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, Beacon Press, 1984), 1:390.

<sup>53</sup> Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson, 25-26.

autonomy as communicative ethics does with regard to Kantian moral theory.”<sup>55</sup> She contends that the cosmopolitan’s “requisite moral task” involves “developing a delicate intersubjective competence within a culturally diverse horizon.”<sup>56</sup>

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Over the past few decades, psychology and philosophy of mind have enjoyed comparatively greater traction in Victorian Studies, although the field seems not to have fully heeded Anderson’s intersubjectivist intervention.<sup>57</sup> With a few notable exceptions, Victorianist literary scholars with an interest in questions of mindedness have tended to focus on the novel.<sup>58</sup> Rick Rylance, for instance, establishes the literary stakes of his argument in what he sees as the common project of “Victorian psychology and Victorian fiction,” namely “the effort to . . . develop the spring of surprise and enlargement that comes with new ways of seeing and thinking.” “This,” Rylance writes, “is . . . what the

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<sup>55</sup> Anderson, 74.

<sup>56</sup> Anderson, 80.

<sup>57</sup> One such exception is Adela Pinch’s *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010). Pinch demonstrates that Victorian writers across a variety of genres represent “the act of thinking about another [person] as an ethically complex . . . even dangerously powerful thing to do” (1). Pinch focuses on what she describes as “purely mental relations,” and as such her account emphasizes nineteenth-century fads such as telepathy, mesmerism, and psychical research, though she addresses intersubjectivity as well (1). I have elected to exclude so-called occult phenomena from my discussion here for two reasons. The first is that, while obviously relevant to intersubjectivity, these kinds of phenomena strike me as to some extent occluding the daily lived experience aspect of ordinary human relationships in which I am interested. The second is that such phenomena have been well-documented by literary and cultural historians in the past few decades; see, for example, Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002, repr. 2007); Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004); and Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> Exceptions include: W. David Shaw, *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (London: Athlone Press, 1987); Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988); and, more recently, Gregory Tate, *The Poet’s Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry, 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 2013).

new form of the Victorian realist novel enabled.”<sup>59</sup> Vanessa L. Ryan similarly has shown that, via their preoccupation with automatic, nondeliberate processes like “unconscious cerebration”—a term coined by the noted physiologist and physician William Benjamin Carpenter—“both the form of the Victorian novel and the experience of reading novels played an important role in ongoing debates about the nature of consciousness” during the nineteenth century, even “radically redefining the nature of what it means to ‘think’ by calling into question ‘the very interiority of ‘inner’ thoughts and feelings.’”<sup>60</sup> Andrew H. Miller, whose account of skepticism and second-person relations informs my own, especially with respect to the dramatic monologue, likewise “focus[es] most intently on the novel,” a genre he is “especially well-suited to capture . . . epistemological and social preoccupations.”<sup>61</sup> Elisha Cohn likewise ultimately offers an analysis of the Victorian novel even while attempting to foreground the “lyric moment . . . embedded within the *Bildungsroman*” and to treat “the logics of lyric and narrative as modes, rather than as structural categories or genres.”<sup>62</sup>

The rise of mass literacy in the nineteenth century, and the novel’s important role in that development, goes some way toward explaining this critical tendency to overlook the contribution of Victorian poetry in general to the development of modernist narrative technique. Mary Poovey describes how the conventions of the Victorian novel worked to facilitate the emergence of mass culture, notably by failing to “ascribe full autonomy to

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<sup>59</sup> Rylance, 3. Rylance explains that his own work evolved out of his interest in George Eliot’s “way of dramatizing multiple perspectives,” effectively offering “an invitation to the reader to converse across cultures and history, across different forms of knowledge, across assumptions, prejudice, and ideology” (3). It is in such moments that he locates “the authentic ethical action in her work” (3).

<sup>60</sup> Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012), 6, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), xii.

<sup>62</sup> Elisha Cohn, *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 17.

the psychological domain.” Significant for our purposes is the note on which Poovey concludes: “The specification of this domain [the psychological]—and the development of ways to represent and govern it—were to become definitive preoccupations of the modern novel.”<sup>63</sup> And yet as Isobel Armstrong observes:

[T]he nature of the experiencing subject, the problems of representation, fiction and language, are just as much the heart of Victorian problems as they are preoccupations of modernism. The difference is that the Victorians see them as problems, the modernists do not. Where the Victorians strive to give a content to these problems, political, sexual, epistemological, and to formulate a cultural critique, the moderns celebrate the elimination of content. Victorian problems become abstracted, formalised and aestheticised. The difference is ideological. . . . The modernist repression of the Victorians comes surely from an understanding that the Victorians had anticipated the self-reflexive condition and rejected it.<sup>64</sup>

Armstrong’s work is an important touchstone for my analysis; however, while she is interested in the continuity between Victorian and modernist poetics, I am interested in Victorian poetry’s role in the emergence of modernist narrative technique, specifically with Robert Browning’s influence upon Henry James. Let us turn now to these writers.

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<sup>63</sup> Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 153-54. Poovey adds that, “[i]n the process of specifying this domain, of course, the modern novel has helped naturalize what we have come to think of as the psychological” (154).

<sup>64</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 7.



## PROLOGUE

### **The Victorian Poet and the Modernist Novelist:**

#### **Robert Browning and Henry James**

One of the broader aims of this dissertation is to suggest that Victorian poetry and the Modernist novel should be understood as generic variations of a continuous literary-philosophical project, one intent on interrogating the vicissitudes of intersubjectivity, on mapping the contours of relational experience. Browning and James offer an ideal point of entry for an investigation of this sort. The longevity of Browning's career—new works appeared regularly from the publication of *Pauline* in 1833 until his death in 1889, a span of more than five decades almost perfectly coincident with Victoria's reign—combined with his influence on early twentieth-century poetry make his work particularly useful for examining the transition between the two periods.<sup>65</sup> This is all the more true when he is paired—and compared—with James, a novelist whose technical development can be tracked across the same period. As we will see, Browning and James have a significant number of commonalities, from their shared penchant for the transnational, cosmopolitan lifestyle and their mutual love for Italy in particular, to their respective failed attempts to write for the stage despite great success in adapting the dramatic mode to other genres, to their shared reputation for difficulty—indeed, and more damningly, even for inscrutability—well before High Modernism elevated such qualities to aesthetic ethos. A

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<sup>65</sup> Poster child of modernist difficulty Ezra Pound famously claimed Browning as a poetic father. Perhaps as a result of this association, criticism examining Browning's importance to the emergence of modernism has tended to emphasize his influence over a comparatively narrow range of modernist poets, most notably Pound and T. S. Eliot. See, for example, G. Robert Strange, "Browning and Modern Poetry" (1954), in *Browning's Mind and Art*, ed. Clarence Tracy (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), 184-97; see also Roy E. Gridley, "Browning among the Modern Poets," in *Browning: Routledge Author Guides* (London: Routledge, 1972), 165-78.

1903 review—and defense—of James’s late style by William Dean Howells makes the connection with Browning explicit:

I have a theory that it is not well to penetrate every recess of an author’s meaning. It robs him of the charm of mystery, and the somewhat labyrinthine construction of Mr. James’s later sentences lends itself to the practice of the self-denial necessary to the preservation of this charm. What I feel sure of is that he has a meaning in it all, and that by and by, perhaps when I least expect it, I shall surprise his meaning. In the meanwhile I rest content with what I do know. In spite of all the Browning Clubs—even the club which has put up a monument to the poet’s butler-ancestor—all of Browning is not clear, but enough of Browning is clear for any real lover of his poetry.<sup>66</sup>

“[A] good deal of what is called obscurity in you,” Elizabeth observed to Robert in 1845, as their correspondence veered into the realm of courtship, “arises from a habit of very subtle association, —so subtle, that you are probably unconscious of it.” Such associative thinking, she continued, had the effect of seeming “to throw together on the same level & in the same light, things of likeness & unlikeness—till the reader grows confused as I did, & takes one for another.”<sup>67</sup> An 1883 review in *Century Magazine* echoed the sentiment: “the best in [Browning] is something that hardly comes to the consciousness of the reader, though it influences him profoundly.”<sup>68</sup> While marveling at the poet’s seemingly telepathic ability to communicate with to his audience, this same critic also laments the extreme difficulty of understanding Browning’s verse: “He has veiled himself in a language often obscure, often rough and discursive to the verge of unintelligibility, sometimes off to the perilous point of mannerism.” Significantly, in this account it is not only *consciousness* that appears to get short-circuited but *language* as well. How does

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<sup>66</sup> William Dean Howells, “Mr. Henry James’s Later Work,” *North American Review* 176 (January 1903), repr. in *Letters, Fictions, Lives: Henry James and William Dean Howells*, ed. Michael Anesko (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 388-89.

<sup>67</sup> EBB to RB, 24 May 1845, in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, 10:237.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Pearsall, 17.

this work? That is, in the words of George Steiner, “What do we mean when we say: ‘this poem, or this passage in this poem is *difficult*?’ How can the language-act most charged with the intent of communication, of reaching out to touch the listener or the reader at his inmost, be opaque, resistant to immediacy and comprehension, if this is what we mean by ‘difficulty’?”<sup>69</sup> The answer, I want to suggest, is crucial to understanding intersubjectivity and the connection between Browning and James.

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Certainly there is no shortage of reasons to put the works of Browning in dialogue with those of James. Apparent discrepancy of generic *métier* notwithstanding—indeed, as we will discover, reading the two writers in conjunction all but forces us to question such distinctions—their points of connection are numerous. Arguably most important is the fact that Browning and James knew one another personally. Despite the three decades separating them in age, the two writers were contemporaries as well as luminaries in the intellectual world of late-nineteenth-century London, running in the same social circles, traveling to the same continental destinations—both made frequent, almost yearly, trips to Italy, on which they often visited the same people—and “din[ing] at the same lamp-lit Victorian tables,” where, or so the conventional account holds, their behavior revealed them to be, if not exactly “friends,” at least “the pleasantest of dinner-table acquaintances.”<sup>70</sup> For a little over two years they also happened to be neighbors: from

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<sup>69</sup> George Steiner, “On Difficulty,” *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 18.

<sup>70</sup> Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, 5 vol. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1953-72), 2:330, 3:275.

Hereafter cited by volume and page number and abbreviated *Life of HJ*. Full bibliographical information

June 1887 until the poet's death in December 1889, they resided mere doors from one another in De Vere Gardens, Kensington, with Browning at N<sup>o</sup> 29 and James across the street and on the same block, at N<sup>o</sup> 34. When Browning's remains were interred in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey in early January 1890, James was not only in attendance but wrote a report of the proceedings for *The Speaker*.<sup>71</sup> And over two decades later, at a 1912 celebration of the centennial of the poet's birth, James once again paid him homage in a keynote lecture delivered before the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature.<sup>72</sup>

The standard account of the Browning-James relationship, the one advanced by the novelist's biographer and James family archivist Leon Edel, maintains that the two men "had not become friends" at the time of the poet's death.<sup>73</sup> If indeed this was the case—and, as I will discuss, there is a puzzling and problematic absence of evidence in either direction—the social no less than physical proximity of the two men, especially during the last two-and-a-half years of Browning's life, makes it rather surprising. It becomes all the more striking in light of the number of "surprising parallels" between the two writers, as Browning biographer Maisie Ward has noted:

Both were Europeans rather than merely American or merely English. Both cared more for the individual than for "humanity," and paid insufficient attention to the social evils of the age. Both

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about the component volumes of this standard James biography, including individual titles and years of first publication, can be found in the Bibliography.

<sup>71</sup> James's account was published anonymously, at his request, in *The Speaker* on 4 January 1890 under the title "Browning in Westminster Abbey"; however, it was reprinted just three years later as part of his non-fiction prose collection *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (London: J. R. Osgood, McIlvaine, 1893), 233-40. I will have more to say about James's initial insistence on the anonymous publication of the piece and his strange reversal of that decision in Chapter 4.

<sup>72</sup> The lecture, entitled "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*," was printed in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature* in 1912. A revised version appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in July of that year and again slightly later in James's critical collection *Notes on Novelists* (London: J. M. Dent, 1914), 385-411. I examine this piece closely in Chapter 4.

<sup>73</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 2:275.

tried the theater, and both failed for the same reason—too little action and too much talk. Both had an admiring court, including alike sufficiently remarkable and dull and adhesive women. Both had intense family feeling, both spoke with deep tenderness of their dead mothers, but both had left them to live abroad. Both were in their work intensely observant of detail, admirers of Balzac, yet each with individual genius striking out a new line—to be admired and imitated . . . by a host of others.<sup>74</sup>

Ward goes on to point out that both were uncommonly extroverted, particularly for writers. “Of all ambitions that of social success should be most alien to the artist,” she writes, yet both James and Browning had it to a marked degree: both were artists of the rarest quality, both were worldings.” Yet at the same time, each was deeply attached to solitude and fiercely protective of his personal life: “Both had what Edel terms ‘a rage of privacy,’” Ward notes, “they engaged in ‘mystifications’ to cover their tracks, wanted their correspondents to burn all letters, themselves burned much that we long today to have.”<sup>75</sup>

I want to begin my study of Browning and James by drawing attention to the last point in Ward’s catalogue—both because burned letters will prove to be important for our discussion of James’s 1888 novella *The Aspern Papers*, to which I turn in Chapter 3, and because what has struck me most forcefully in the course of my research is the near-total absence of primary documents that offer insight into their relationship. There are no letters, either from Browning to James or the reverse, known to be in existence.<sup>76</sup> To be

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<sup>74</sup> Maisie Ward, *Two Robert Brownings? [1861-1889]*, vol. 2 of *Robert Browning and His World*, 2 vol. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 257-58. Note the title of this volume, which alludes to a well-known comment James made about his first impression of Browning in letter to his sister, Alice. I discuss James’s remark and its implications later in this section.

<sup>75</sup> Ward, 2:258.

<sup>76</sup> The Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor University in Waco, TX, maintains a searchable register of both poets’ letters, including dates, recipients, current manuscript locations, and publication histories; see *The Brownings’ Correspondence: An Online Edition*: <http://www.browningscorrespondence.com>. The Center for Henry James Studies at Creighton University in Omaha, NB, has compiled a similar record in

sure, as Ward notes, both men burned vast quantities of their personal correspondence, a point to which I will return in the Conclusion. Even so, James in particular was a prodigious letter-writer—his surviving missives alone are estimated to total between 12,000 and 15,000—and it seems remarkable that so few of these so much as mention Browning, particularly given that they were neighbors who shared a number of close friends within the literary world and beyond it. By contrast, for instance, there are dozens of surviving letters from both Browning and James to the likes of Thomas Carlyle, Frederic Leighton, Edmund Gosse, James Russell Lowell, Charles Eliot Norton, Daniel Curtis, and William Wetmore Story—just to name some of the better known of their many mutual contacts—and these abound with references to common acquaintances.

The facts of the Browning-James relationship, as we understand them at present, are as follows. In *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), the second volume of his never-completed autobiography, James reports that the “depths” of Browning’s verse were first “revealed” to him during his early teenage years thanks to the influence of a slightly older friend, the painter John Lafarge, with whom he became close when the James family took up seasonal residence in Newport, Rhode Island, between 1858 and 1861.<sup>77</sup> James writes that his parents “had not divined in us as yet an aptitude for that author”; in Edel’s words, “La Farge had only to invoke Browning and Henry fell upon the volumes.”<sup>78</sup> At the time, the artist, who believed illustrations ought to be taken “as serious as easel paintings,” was hard at work on a series based on the poems in Browning’s *Men and Women* (1855). He

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conjunction with the University of Nebraska Press; see *A Calendar of the Letters of Henry James & A Biographical Register of Henry James’s Correspondents*: <http://jamescalendar.unl.edu>.

<sup>77</sup> Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), 93. In *Browning in America*, Greer notes that William and Henry James, along with Perry, La Farge, and actor James Steele MacKaye “composed a remarkable group of Browning readers at Newport, Rhode Island, in 1859” (84).

<sup>78</sup> HJ, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, 93; Edel, *Life of HJ*, 1:165.

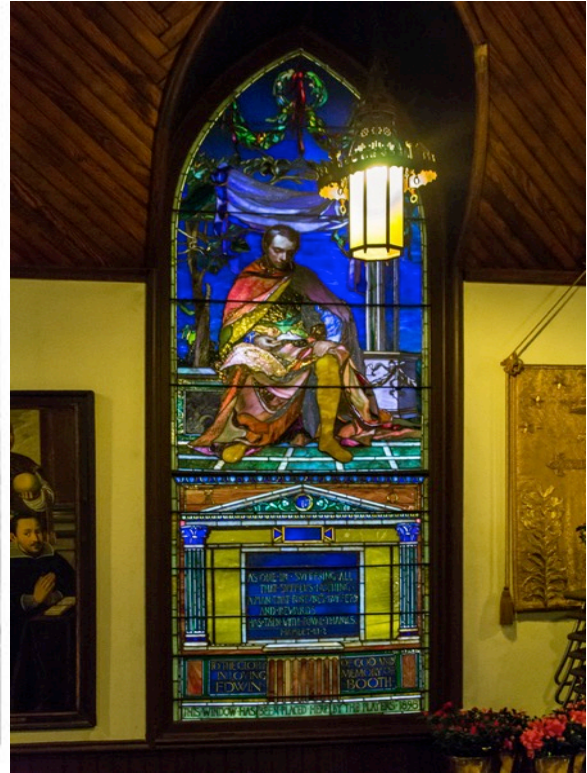
“envisioned several hundred designs, created dozens of preparatory drawings, and finally produced six drawings on glass intended for exposure to light-sensitive paper.”<sup>79</sup> Young Henry James, whose portrait La Farge painted in the summer of 1862, surely witnessed this creative endeavor. Unfortunately, the ambitious project, a fully-illustrated American edition of *Men and Women*, died when the publisher asked La Farge to underwrite the cost of the pictures himself; in 1873, however, the artist made proofs of a few of the illustrations to sell in portfolios through the Boston-based gallery Doll and Richards. Still later, in 1898, La Farge repurposed one of his Browning sketches, a rendering inspired by the 1864 collection *Dramatis Personae*, as the basis for a memorial window in honor of the celebrated Shakespearean tragedian Edwin Booth (figs. 1 and 2).<sup>80</sup> The image depicts an actor holding a mask, a fitting emblem for Browning’s dramatic monologue technique and what James came to appreciate as his entrenched social persona.

(next page)

FIGURES 1 AND 2. *Left:* A drawing based on Robert Browning’s 1864 verse collection *Dramatis Personae* by the American painter John La Farge. This image was reproduced in an article on La Farge by George Parsons Lathrop in *Scribner’s Monthly* in February 1881. *Right:* La Farge later repurposed the illustration for “Actor Contemplating Mask,” a memorial window in honor of actor Edwin Booth, which was installed in the Church of the Transfiguration in New York City in 1898. Photograph by Jeffrey Howe, from “John La Farge: New England Stained Glass: A Digital Guide.” Boston College Libraries and McMullen Museum: [library.bc.edu/lafargeglass/](http://library.bc.edu/lafargeglass/)

<sup>79</sup> James L. Yarnall, *John La Farge, A Biographical and Critical Study* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 78. La Farge made a total of six images using a process that involved drawing on transparent glass and printing the resultant image on light-sensitive paper. Only three of the illustrations have known whereabouts at present: a pair of framed renderings of “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” and “Fra Lippo Lippi” were sold at auction by Skinner in 2010 (2514M, Lot #405), while a third, based on the poem “Misconceptions,” is in the Smithsonian American Art Museum (acc. no. 1966.1.1).

<sup>80</sup> See Yarnall, 78, 91n160, 215.



Before James left his parents' home in Cambridge for good in 1876, his "little library in Quincy Street," as Edel describes it, featured "Browning, Balzac, Sainte-Beuve, Gautier, Taine, and Goethe," as well as George Eliot and George Sand.<sup>81</sup> At least two of the Browning volumes evidently travelled with James across the Atlantic Ocean, for the library at Lamb House included both "a copy of *Dramatis Personae* (1864) inscribed, 'H. James Jr. from his aff. Father. Aug. 20. 1864'," and a copy of the verse drama *Sordello* (1840) from a friend he shared with Lafarge, Thomas Sergeant Perry, who would go on to become the editor of the *North American Review*, inscribed and dated "Mar. 2 '64."<sup>82</sup> These were not the only Browning volumes represented on James's shelves, however; a catalogue of the novelist's library at the time of his death in 1916 lists almost all of the

<sup>81</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 1:260.

<sup>82</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 1:165n.



poet's works, many of them individual first editions—including *The Inn Album* (1875), *Dramatic Idylls* (1879), *Ferishtah's Fancies* (1884), and *Asolando* (1890)—as well as a set of the complete *Poetical Works* (1884-94), plus Alexandra Sutherland Orr's *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (1891) and the controversially-published *Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* (1899).<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, according to Edel, "[o]n one table in a miniature bookcase, he had Browning's *Men and Women* in the two-volume first edition, yellow calf by Bedford, and the four volumes of *The Ring and the Book* bound by Rivière. We know how carefully these were read."<sup>84</sup> How carefully indeed! By the time James embarked on his Grand Tour of the continent in 1869, he had written two stories that explicitly draw their inspiration from Browning and which I discuss in Chapter 2. The first, the "The Story of a Masterpiece," ran in two installments in the *Galaxy* in January and February of 1868, and the second, "A Light Man," appeared in the *Galaxy* the following July.

James made his first journey to Italy, a country that, thanks to his reading, had become inextricable with Browning in his mind, as the numerous quotations from and references to the poet in his letters home make clear. In a letter to his brother William, for instance, James describes reading *The Ring and the Book*, which recently had completed its four-volume publication, "in honor of Italy," and remarks—interestingly if somewhat offhandedly—that he feels that "Browning decidedly gains in interest tho' he loses in a certain mystery and (so to speak) infinitude, after a visit" to the Old World.<sup>85</sup> Another

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<sup>83</sup> See *The Library of Henry James*, ed. Edel and Adeline R. Tintner (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 23-24, 51. This is a compilation of the volumes known to have been part of the novelist's collection.

<sup>84</sup> Edel, "The Two Libraries of Henry James," in *The Library of Henry James*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> HJ to William James, 8 March 1870, in *Henry James Letters*, 4 vol., ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 1974-84), 1:207-8. Hereafter cited by volume and page number and abbreviated *HJ Letters*. Full bibliographical information about the component volumes of this standard edition of James's letters, can be found in the Bibliography.

missive from this period finds him asking a friend in Florence whether “the shadow of Browning hover[s] through the city?”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, an 1873 notebook entry records “[a] drive . . . to the Villa Madama,” which James calls “a place like a page out of Browning wonderful in its haunting melancholy.”<sup>87</sup>

It was not until the late winter and early spring of 1877 that the paths of poet and novelist began to cross with meaningful frequency.<sup>88</sup> At that time, both men were living in London, where Browning had returned with Pen following Elizabeth’s death, and James, having successfully launched his writing career—at this same period, as we will see momentarily, he reviewed Browning’s *The Inn Album* as well as an early edition of EBB’s letters—had taken up expatriate residence. Two years before, in 1875, James had written to the Victorian poetry critic E. C. Stedman, “I quite sympathise with you in your wonder that Browning should never have felt the intellectual comfort of ‘a few grave, rigid laws.’ But Browning’s badness I have never professed to understand. I limit myself to vastly enjoying his goodness.”<sup>89</sup> This, however, was evidently not quite the case, for James’s review of *The Inn Album*, which appeared shortly following his move to London in January 1876, was decidedly equivocal. Though he deemed it “only barely comprehensible,” perhaps “decipherable only to the author himself,” he also grudgingly

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Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, like many of his most famous poems, is set in Italy during the Renaissance. In the same letter, James mentions reading three other books, including, as it happens, “the new vol. of Ste. Beuve,” a reference to the French critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, an author who, as we will see in the next chapter, was an important if indirect mediator in the Browning-James relationship. Unfortunately, given that the French critic’s output was prolific at this time and that James was reading him in the original, the volume in question cannot be determined with precision.

<sup>86</sup> HJ to Elizabeth Boott, 24 January [1872], in *HJ Letters*, 1:270.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Edel, *Life of HJ*, 2:116. The Villa Madama is located outside Rome.

<sup>88</sup> While I follow Posnock and Edel in dating their meeting to 1877, Michael Meredith puts it in 1878; see the introduction to “*More Than Friend*”: *The Letters of Robert Browning to Katherine de Kay Bronson*, ed. Meredith (Waco: The Armstrong Library of Baylor University; Winfield: Wedgestone Press, 1985), xxiv.

<sup>89</sup> HJ to E. C. Stedman, 1 September [1875], in *HJ Letters*, 1:482.

admitted that “[t]he whole picture indefinably appeals to the imagination.”<sup>90</sup> If no small part of the issue James took with the work stemmed from his conviction that “a writer of Mr. Browning’s intellectual power” (“IA,” 783) ought to have produced a text that made his considerable mental gifts accessible to the reader, this evidently was a function of what the novelist perceived as a failure—even a deliberate and obstinate unwillingness—to adhere to the conventions of poetry as a genre. James levels the objection that Browning’s work in general is deficient in all three of the poetic modes identified by Aristotle. He complains:

Up to a certain point, like everything of Mr. Browning’s, [*The Inn Album*] is highly dramatic and vivid, and beyond that point, like all its companions, it is as little dramatic as possible. It is not narrative, for there is not a line of comprehensible, consecutive statement in the two hundred and eleven pages of the volume. It is not lyrical, for there is not a phrase which in any degree does the office of the poetry that comes lawfully into the world—chants itself, images itself, or lingers in the memory. (“IA,” 782)

While James would come to appreciate Browning’s generic amalgamation as a means of rendering intersubjectivity and even, as we’ll see, to appropriate it for similar purposes, he initially found the strange mixture of *The Inn Album* quite distasteful, likening Browning to a “chemist with his acids and alkalies” who “knows perfectly well what he is about” but produces a “hiss and sputter and evil aroma” in the laboratory (“IA,” 785). “It is hard to say very coherently what it is,” he writes with evident irritation, adding, it “reads like a series of rough notes for a poem . . . but assuredly it is not a great poem, nor any poem whatsoever” (“IA,” 782). “We are reading neither prose nor poetry,” he further laments:

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<sup>90</sup> HJ, [unsigned] review of *The Inn Album* by Robert Browning, *Nation* (20 January 1876), repr. in *Henry James, Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 786, 782, 785. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated “IA.”

There is something very curious about it and even rather arbitrary, and the reader wonders how it came, in the poet's mind, to take exactly that shape. It is very much as if [Browning] had worked backwards, had seen his dénouement first . . . and then had traced back the possible motives and sources. . . . The idea, with Mr. Browning, always tumbles out into the world in some grotesque hind-foremost manner; it is like an unruly horse backing out of his stall, and stamping and plunging as he comes. ("IA," 785)

Two things are worthy of our notice here. The first is that Browning's unorthodox poetics leads James to speculate about the workings of "the poet's mind," to wonder "how [the poem] came . . . to take exactly that shape." As we will see, this question never ceased to fascinate the novelist, and he returned to it again and again over the course of his career. Second, James reflects that *The Inn Album* seems to have been conceived in reverse, that Browning must have "seen his dénouement first" and then constructed the verse drama with such an end in mind. As we will see, this was a technique that James would use to great effect in *The Aspern Papers*, however much the "grotesque hind-foremost manner" in which the ideas of *The Inn Album* are presented offended him at first.

The memorable image of the "unruly horse backing out of his stall, . . . stamping and plunging as he comes" gains additional significance in view of James's distinctly similar first impression of Browning, whom he met in person at around the same time. Indeed, James's objections to *The Inn Album*—from its "graceless and thankless and altogether unavailable character" ("IA," 783) to its "wantonness" and "crudity" ("IA," 782) to its preponderance of what the novelist, complaining that "[t]he people talk too much in long set speeches" ("IA," 785), refers to as "[i]nfinite discourse of that formidable full-charged sort that issues from all Mr. Browning's characters" ("IA," 783)—are repeated almost verbatim in his various accounts of encountering the poet in London society during the late winter and early spring of 1877. The novelist's surviving

missives indicate that he dined in company with Browning at the home of George Washburn Smalley, a well-known American newspaper correspondent, on at least two occasions that season, once toward the end of January and again near the conclusion of March. James's letters recording his first impressions of Browning are as notable for his familiarity with the poet's oeuvre as for his bafflement that such a seemingly ordinary man could have produced such extraordinary works. "Browning is no more like to *Paracelsus* than I to Hercules," he confesses to his mother after their initial meeting, hastily qualifying, "but [he] is a great gossip and a very 'sympathetic' easy creature."<sup>91</sup> A somewhat less generous report to William Dean Howells deems Browning to be "a great chatterer but no *Sordello* at all."<sup>92</sup> In the assessment James offered to his sister, Alice, he is more frankly negative:

[T]he chattering and self-complacent Robert B., . . . I am sorry to say, does not make on me a purely agreeable impression. His transparent eagerness to hold the *dé de la conversation* & a sort of shrill interruptingness which distinguishes him have in them a kind of vulgarity. Besides which, strange to say, his talk doesn't strike me as very good. It is altogether gossip & personality & is not very beautifully worded. But evidently there are 2 Brownings—an

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<sup>91</sup> HJ to Mrs. Henry James, Sr., 31 January [1877], in *HJ Letters*, 2:94. This letter to his mother offers the following context for James's probable first encounter with the poet: "I am getting quite into the current of London life . . . I will try and remember what I have been doing, to entertain you withal. . . . The next day, I think, I dined at Smalley's—a splendid banquet, all of famous men. . . . Browning, [John] Motley, [J. A.] Froude, [Charles] Kinglake, Mr. [Edward] Pierrepont and half a dozen other men whom I was glad to see" (92-93). After recounting a few more such social engagements, James adds a parenthetical note that begins, "I forgot to say that after Smalley's dinner I had a long talk with Browning," and ends with the unfavorable comparative analogy quoted here and repeated with variation in subsequent letters (94).

<sup>92</sup> HJ to William Dean Howells, 30 March [1877], in *HJ Letters*, 2:107. In this letter James clearly refers to a different encounter from that mentioned in the earlier letter to his mother. He writes: "I dined yesterday in company with Browning, at Smalley's—where were also [Thomas] Huxley and his wife and the editor and editress of the *Daily News* [Mrs. and Mrs. F. H. Hill]: among the cleverest people I have met here" (107). Browning's archive confirms the dinner meeting, although the date on James's letter seems to be off by one day; a note from the poet to Mrs. Smalley accepts an invitation to dine on the 30th. RB to Phoebe Garnaut Smalley, 26 March 1877, *The Browning Letters*, Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor Univ., Waco, TX: <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ab-letters/id/7496>.

esoteric & an exoteric. The former never peeps out in society, & the latter hasn't a ray of suggestion of *Men & Women*.”<sup>93</sup>

Of note here is that James evidently expected to be able to see evidence of the creation in the creator; this is all the more surprising and interesting given that a key feature of the dramatic monologue, the poetic genre that Browning pioneered along with Tennyson—what in essence makes it “dramatic”—is that it has a speaker who is *not* the poet. This, as one Browning critic phrases it, requires the poet “to attend to the processes of minds unlike his own,” to “explore unfamiliar regions of thought and emotion,” to “enter into the lives . . . of people unlike himself and speak for them”—in short, to grapple with the problem of other minds.<sup>94</sup> As James wrote in an unpublished 1865 review in which he acknowledged Browning’s status as “the great master” of the genre, “*To project yourself into the consciousness of a person essentially your opposite requires the audacity of great genius* and even men of genius are cautious in approaching the problem.”<sup>95</sup>

James’s repeated mentions of his encounters with Browning and his emphasis on the poet’s unexpected strangeness in person, most evident in his striking if half-jesting conclusion that there must be “2 Brownings,” reveal the importance of the problem of other minds to their relationship. Indeed, this ‘problem’ is at the heart of Ross Posnock’s *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning* (1985), the only extensive treatment

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<sup>93</sup> HJ to Alice James, 8 April [1877], in *Henry James: A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1999), 87. Horne’s volume contains some 150 letters, including this one, not printed in the standard four-volume edition of the novelist’s correspondence edited by Edel and cited elsewhere. Note that what Horne transcribes as *dé*—the French word for “die,” meaning one of the pair of numbered cubes used in gaming—*The Complete Letters of Henry James* renders as *clé*—an old spelling of the French word for “key” (*clef*). In both cases, the sense of the expression is that James perceives Browning as monopolizing the conversation. Horne points out that the esoteric/exoteric distinction comes from Aristotle and Pythagoras; see *HJ: Life in Letters*, 87. The *OED* defines the former as “designed for, or appropriate to, an inner circle of advanced or privileged disciples” and the latter as “communicated to outsiders, intelligible to the public; commonplace, simple.”

<sup>94</sup> Jacob Korg, *Browning and Italy* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1983), 2, 108.

<sup>95</sup> HJ, unpublished review of *John Godfrey’s Fortunes* by Bayard Taylor, quoted in Edel, “Autobiography in Fiction: An Unpublished Review by Henry James,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 11 (1957): 256.

of the two writers to date. Continuing the tradition that hails James as the progenitor of psychological realism, Posnock argues that the novelist's encounters with the poet were crucial to his ability to "inaugurate the modern novel of consciousness."<sup>96</sup> According to Posnock's psychoanalytically driven account:

James was disturbed by Browning on a profoundly personal level and in intimate proximity. . . . [He] found Browning's obstreperousness not only "vulgar" but inexplicable: How could the author of such subtle verse behave like any other "sane, sound" London gentleman? . . . Though Edmund Gosse, a friend of both writers, was content to describe Browning blandly as "the subtlest of poets . . . the simplest of men," James found in this fact a puzzling, at times tormenting, discontinuity between Browning's public and private selves. . . .<sup>97</sup>

Clearly, the '*Problem of Robert Browning*' in the title of Posnock's work signifies a version of the problem of other minds, although Posnock never describes it in such terms, perhaps because—rather surprisingly—his account of the relationship between the two writers does not address issues of skepticism. Instead, Posnock focuses on theorizing the intense degree of "personal anxiety" that he argues Browning stimulated in James as a result of his fame as both husband and poet.<sup>98</sup> According to Posnock, for the young novelist, the older poet came to represent "a threatening figure blocking entry to the private life of sexuality."<sup>99</sup> Needless to say, this line of argument, in which James is the disciple and Browning the master, results in a standard psychoanalytic interpretation of the relationship, one that owes much to Harold Bloom's seminal work *The Anxiety of Influence*, which had appeared ten years earlier.<sup>100</sup> Posnock differentiates himself from

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<sup>96</sup> Ross Posnock, *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>97</sup> Posnock, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Posnock, 6.

<sup>99</sup> Posnock, 191.

<sup>100</sup> See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973).

Bloom by deviating from the traditional Freudian paradigm, with its basis in Oedipal conflict, in favor of René Girard's alternative theory of the double bind. Whereas the Freudian model holds that the male child strives to usurp his father's place, the Girardian framework rejects the notion that the patricidal impulse is conscious. Per Girard, desire is both mimetic and triangular: the subject (disciple) comes to desire the object (master) as a result of perceiving the object's desirability for a third party (the model, the other).<sup>101</sup> In Posnock's account, the role of the third party is played by La Farge, the painter who gave his James introduction to Browning's verse in 1859.

In examining the Browning-James relationship anew, I aim to nuance the account offered by Posnock and to complicate the models of influence on which it is based. Part of my goal is to offer a reading of the Browning-James relationship that is more readily compatible with Cameron's version of the novelist's project as locating consciousness *between* persons. Thus, for reasons that should be apparent, I want to move beyond the paradigm of ego psychology toward a more dynamic, relational model of the interactions between the self and the world. I have chosen to do this by focusing on intersubjectivity. As we saw earlier, this concept, as it emerged in Husserl's phenomenology and later was expounded upon by other theorists, amounted to a radical new understanding of the self as a predominantly relational entity. While both Bloom's emphasis on Oedipal conflict and Girard's revisionist version of that conflict, the double bind, offer useful insights into the psychology of influence, I want to shift critical attention away from its longstanding focus on feelings of anxious rivalry and sexual inferiority—that is, on James having been threatened by Browning, as Posnock would have it—in order to foreground the creative,

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<sup>101</sup> See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), esp. 169-92.



generative effects of curiosity and puzzlement the poet is known to have occasioned in the novelist. One way in which my account diverges from Posnock's, therefore, is that I do not regard James as having been a "disciple" of Browning; I do not see him as having tried to "minimize or conceal" the older writer's influence.<sup>102</sup> Though I certainly do not dispute Posnock's contention that James experienced the relationship as having a competitive aspect, I take the novelist at his word when he declares, as he does repeatedly in "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*," that his chief response to Browning's verse was the sense that it was "a preparation for something."<sup>103</sup> That 'something,' I argue, in keeping with Posnock, amounts to a version of what he and other critics have called "the modernist novel of consciousness"; however, I differ significantly from Posnock in that I understand consciousness as an *intersubjective* phenomenon.<sup>104</sup> In this vein, as I show, whatever James may have perceived as Browning's shortcomings, he recognized in the poet's dramatic monologue the potential for a new way of relating to texts—what I call *reading intersubjectively*—that had significant consequences for modernist prose fiction.

James brings this potential to light in his critical treatments of Browning, in his Prefaces—with their emphasis on the role played by "centers of consciousness," a concept that emerges from his reading of Browning's dramatic monologues—and, most importantly, in his own fictional works. My interest, therefore, resides primarily in the technical, formal strategies of narratology and reader response that James knowingly adapts from Browning. This means that—and here is another place where I diverge from Posnock—my focus is not so much on James's personal, psychological reaction to

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<sup>102</sup> Posnock, 15.

<sup>103</sup> HJ, "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*," 804.

<sup>104</sup> Although this is far from his central claim, in his introduction Posnock declares: "Browning's art of process, which creates a mimesis of mental activity, helps James inaugurate the modern novel of consciousness" (4).

Browning as on the ways he uses Browning's dramatic methods to render the psychology of his characters, in particular his narrators. Another way to say this is that, while I share with Posnock a methodological interest in "the interplay between the literary and the biographical," my account is less overtly biographical than literary in its orientation.<sup>105</sup> That is, I am less concerned with the particular details of these authors' personal lives—though I do delve into such circumstances when the information seems relevant to the works in question, as for instance in the case of James writing *The Aspern Papers* while residing on the outskirts of Florence in a villa rented by his spinster friend Constance Fenimore Woolson—and more interested in their works' mutual concern with the problems of biographical criticism; the competing claims of privacy and posterity; and whether it is possible, let alone desirable, to have access to the innermost thoughts of another mind.

It bears remarking that Browning, for all of his uniqueness, was not alone in the capacity to "disturb" James in this way. On the contrary, and especially during his first years in Europe, the novelist's initial face-to-face encounters with writers whose works he had long admired proved, more often than not, unsettling precisely because of what he perceived as a profound disjunction between created and creator. Following a chance run-in with Matthew Arnold—whose 1865 *Essays in Criticism* he had extolled in one of his earliest reviews a few years before—on his first solo tour of the continent, for instance, James remarked that he found the esteemed poet-critic's presence less "momentous" than expected," in part because he judged the man himself to be "not as handsome as . . . his

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<sup>105</sup> Posnock, 6.

poetry.”<sup>106</sup> Walter Pater was similarly described and summarily dismissed with a mere parenthetical aside: “I talked with . . . W. Pater (who is far from being as beautiful as his own prose).”<sup>107</sup> Not even the Poet Laureate escaped such treatment. Witness an 1878 letter from James to Charles Eliot Norton:

I went to lunch with Tennyson . . . and . . . he took me up into his study and read aloud—not very well—“Locksley Hall,” from beginning to end . . . I don’t know whether you saw anything of this author who personally is less agreeable than his works—having a manner that is rather bad than good. But whenever I feel disposed to reflect that Tennyson is not personally Tennysonian, I summon up the image of Browning, and this has the effect of making me check my complaints.<sup>108</sup>

In a letter of July 1880, James describes hearing Browning read his verse aloud:

One of my latest sensations was going one day to Lady Airlie’s to hear Browning read his own poems—with the comfort of finding that, at least, if you don’t understand them, he himself apparently understands them even less. He read them as if he hated them and would like to bite them to pieces.<sup>109</sup>

The similarities in these accounts make it clear that James’s preoccupation with the problem of other minds is a general phenomenon, a seemingly inevitable consequence of his first encounters with other prominent men of letters. Something about being faced with the corporeal reality of an intellectual faculty he had admired from a distance regularly provoked this reaction in James, but it is clear that Browning provoked it to a

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<sup>106</sup> HJ to William James, 9 April 1873, in *HJ Letters*, 1:364-65. In a letter describing the experience to another of his many correspondents, James clarifies the nature of the let-down: “I had . . . a little small-talk with [Arnold] . . . It remained small-talk and he did nothing to make it *big*, as my youthful dreams would have promised me. He’s a good fellow . . . but he is decidedly a disappointment, in a superficial sense” (HJ to Sarah Butler Wister, 9 May [1873], in *HJ Letters*, 1:381). The explanation bears mention due to its similarity to the novelist’s later complaint about Browning.

<sup>107</sup> HJ to Mrs. Henry James, Sr., 18 January [1879], in *HJ Letters*, 2:212.

<sup>108</sup> HJ to Charles Eliot Norton, 17 November [1878], in *HJ Letters*, 2:196. Note that this letter was composed when the novelist had known Browning for less than two years.

<sup>109</sup> HJ to Grace Norton, 26 July 1880, in *HJ Letters*, 2:302.

much greater extent than anyone else.<sup>110</sup> As the novelist put it at the poet's funeral, "A good many oddities and a good many great writers have been entombed in the Abbey; but none of the odd ones have been so great and none of the great ones so odd."<sup>111</sup>

This becomes abundantly clear in James's two-volume biography of American expatriate sculptor William Wetmore Story, a friend he shared with Browning. Story had been an intimate of Robert and Elizabeth in Italy in the mid-1850s and early 1860s, a period that coincided with a formative stage in his own artistic development and which James accordingly treats at length in the biography. (The Brownings, along with Hawthorne, Thackeray, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Walter Savage Landor, were frequent visitors to Story's Roman salon, the Palazzo Barberini.) When, at the behest of the sculptor's family, he began writing it in 1902, Story had been dead for almost seven years and Browning for nearly thirteen. Significantly, neither Browning's passing nor the passage of time since that event seems to have diminished James's fascination with the poet, who all but eclipses Story in the biography. Indeed, one gets the sense in reading *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* that James found the latter, especially Browning, a more interesting subject than the artist himself.

James describes his conviction that Browning had "arrived somehow, for his own deep purposes, at the enjoyment of a double identity, had literally mastered the secret of

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<sup>110</sup> It should be noted that James was far from alone in being perplexed by the apparent incongruity between Browning's persona and his poetry. Edmund Gosse famously concluded a volume of reminiscences written just after the poet's death by declaring him to have been "[t]he subtlest of writers . . . the simplest of men" (*Robert Browning: Personalities* [London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1890], 92). Evidently this reaction was common enough that Sir Leslie Stephen felt compelled to address it in an 1899 *National Review* essay that noted the publication of the Brownings' correspondence. Stephen writes: "People who met Browning occasionally accepted the commonplace doctrine that the poet and the man may be wholly different persons. Browning, that is, could talk like a brilliant man of the world, and the commonplace person could infer that he did not possess the feelings which he did not care to exhibit at a dinner party. It was not difficult to discover that such a remark showed the superficiality of the observer, not the absence of the underlying qualities" ("The Browning Letters," repr. in *Studies of a Biographer*, 4 vol. [London: Duckworth, 1902], 3:28).

<sup>111</sup> HJ, "Browning in Westminster Abbey," in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers; English Writers*, ed. Edel and Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 788.

dividing the personal consciousness into a pair of independent compartments.”<sup>112</sup>

According to James’s theory of Browning:

The man of the world walked abroad, showed himself, talked, . . . multiplied his contacts and did his duty; the man of “Dramatic Lyrics,” of “Men and Women,” of “The Ring and the Book,” . . . this inscrutable personage sat at home. The poet and the “member of society” were, in a word, dissociated in [Browning] as they can rarely elsewhere have been so that, for the observer impressed with this oddity, the image I began by using quite of necessity completed itself: the wall that built out the idyll . . . of which memory and imagination were virtually composed for him stood there behind him solidly enough, but subject to his privilege of living almost equally on both sides of it. It contained an invisible door through which, working the lock at will, he could softly pass and of which he kept the golden key—carrying the same about with him even in the pocket of his dinner-waistcoat, yet even in his most splendid expansions showing it, happy man, to none. Such at least was the appearance he could repeatedly conjure up to a deep and mystified admirer.<sup>113</sup>

The issue of dissociation, of “dividing of the personal consciousness” in a way that gives rise to a “double identity,” a “discontinuity between . . . public and private selves,” as James puts it, is essential to understanding Browning’s intersubjective poetics and how James adapts them to prose. First, however, we will turn our attention to biography, the supreme genre of other minds and one that makes the “discontinuity” between a subject’s “public and private selves” its driving interest.

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<sup>112</sup> HJ, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, 2 vol. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 2:88-89

<sup>113</sup> HJ, *William Wetmore Story*, 2:88-89. James’s short story “The Private Life” (1891) presents a fictional version of this “double identity,” and the novelist’s preface to the New York Edition of that tale repeats the account of Browning: “I have never ceased to ask myself, in this particular loud, sound, normal, hearty presence . . . what logement, on such premises, the rich proud genius one adored could ever have contrived. . . . The whole aspect and *allure* of the fresh sane man, illustrious and undistinguished . . . was mystifying; they made the question of who then had written the immortal things such a puzzle.”

## **PART II.**

### **TOWARDS A THEORY OF READING INTERSUBJECTIVELY**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Subjective/Objective: Or, Persona and the Question of Biography

*Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,  
And did he stop and speak to you?  
And did you speak to him again?  
How strange it seems and new!*

—Robert Browning, “Memorabilia” (c. 1851)<sup>1</sup>

It might seem counterintuitive to begin charting a route from Browning and the dramatic monologue to James and the unreliable narrator by turning first to Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), the celebrated practitioner of the self-expressive lyric whose tragic early death occurred decades before the period considered in this study. Yet as we will discover here and in our examination of *The Aspern Papers* in Chapter 3, the lives of the Romantic poets—and of Shelley in particular—stimulated Browning and James to some of their most profound meditations on authorial identity. In the previous section, we took note of the conundrum that Browning’s extroverted social persona presented to James during their initial encounters. How, the novelist wondered, could *this* ordinary man, with all his blunders and foibles, be the same individual who had produced such extraordinary and elevated verse? As a matter of fact, Browning repeatedly asked a version of the same question—about Shelley, whom he had never met.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Browning, “Memorabilia,” in vol. 5 of *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, 15 vol., ed. Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 257-58, lines 1-4. Hereafter cited parenthetically by line and abbreviated “M.” As it happens, James (mis)quotes this poem’s opening line—“And did you see Shelley plain?”—in a letter to Edith Wharton in which he also mentions lecturing as part of the Browning Centennial the week before (HJ to Edith Wharton, 12 May 1912, in *HJ Letters*, 4:615). The allusion to the poem seems to be used in reference to Wharton’s travels in Europe, about which James inquires.

What would it mean to “see” a poet “plain,” as the speaker of Browning’s short poem “Memorabilia” asks in reference to Shelley in the lines quoted above? The context provided by the questions that follow—“And did he [Shelley] stop and speak to you? / And did you speak to him again?”—initially seems to point to a literal understanding of the inquiries. The speaker, we take it, has learned that the person he addresses once had a face-to-face exchange with the famous poet, and now he evidently is pressing for details about the meeting. Here the adjective “plain” seems to refer to the interlocutor’s having glimpsed Shelley in real life, perhaps while the poet was occupied with some quotidian task. It quickly becomes apparent that the speaker deifies Shelley and finds it difficult to imagine that there could be anything “plain” about the poet who produced such verse. He can hardly believe that Shelley walked the earth, a mere mortal, in the not-so-distant past, as we learn in the second stanza:

But you were living before that,  
And also you are living after;  
And the memory that I started at—  
My starting moves your laughter. (“M,” 5-8)

Here the speaker seems to be incredulous, not only that he is crossing paths with someone who once crossed paths with Shelley—in effect making his life, to a minute and mediated degree, continuous with the poet’s—but also that the person whom he addresses has gone on living the same way “after” the encounter.

According to Britta Martens, at this point it begins to dawn on the speaker “that a personal acquaintance with Shelley would have no influence on his own life.”<sup>2</sup> In support

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<sup>2</sup> Britta Martens, *Browning, Victorian Poetics, and the Romantic Legacy: Challenging the Personal Voice* (London: Ashgate, 2011), 45.



of this claim, she observes that the last two stanzas of the poem seem to veer off in an entirely different direction:

I crossed a moor, with a name of its own  
And a certain use in the world no doubt,  
Yet a hand's breadth of it shines alone  
'Mid the blank miles round about:

For there I picked up on the heather  
And there I put inside my breast  
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!  
Well, I forget the rest. ("M," 9-16)

"Memorabilia," Martens argues, is a "record of Browning's loss of belief in the Romantic fusion of poet and poem into a single entity." The poem, she contends, "presents the same experience twice, from two different points of view and in different styles."<sup>3</sup> The first two stanzas, in this account, reflect the origin of Browning's poetry in his youthful admiration and emulation of Shelley, while the last two stanzas register his movement away from the Romantic aesthetic, with its basis in autobiographical experience, toward the impersonal poetics of the dramatic monologue. Lee Erickson notes a similar shift. Acknowledging Browning's lifelong obsession with the question of "whether or not subjective, spiritual experience can be communicated to others," Erickson interprets "Memorabilia" as the poet's attempt "to reveal the content of his subjective experience by grounding the transcendental moment in objective circumstance."<sup>4</sup>

The ability to communicate intrapsychic experience to others is a matter of vital importance to intersubjectivity, which, as I have suggested, we can understand in the

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<sup>3</sup> Martens, 44. Martens observes that it "seems somewhat paradoxical that Browning should make his own artistic development the subject of poems in which he justifies his move to a poetics where attention should not be directed toward the author." This leads her to suggest, ultimately, that there is "a congruity between the two" poetic approaches since "it is Romantic self-expression that forms the very basis for Browning's mature, dramatic poetry" (48).

<sup>4</sup> Lee Erickson, *Robert Browning: His Poetry and His Audiences* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), 143.

tradition of Husserl as a mode of relational understanding that occurs at the intersection of the realms Erickson designates as subjective experience and objective circumstance. As a matter of fact, the categories subjective and objective occupy a central place in the discourse of nineteenth-century poetics thanks in part to what is now known as Browning's "Essay on Shelley" (1852). In this rare foray into prose, Browning attempts to theorize the importance of biographical information for "a right understanding of an author's purpose and work[s]" by drawing a distinction between what he terms the "objective poet" and his "subjective" counterpart.<sup>5</sup> Browning's definition of the objective poet holds that he "endeavors to reproduce things external" to himself; this interest in representing the external, Browning writes, means that the objective poet "is properly the *ποιητής*, the fashioner; and the thing fashioned, his poetry, will of necessity be substantive, projected from himself, and distinct" ("ES," 424-25). This is a somewhat tautological argument. The result, Browning argues, is that the work "speaks for itself . . . and the biography of the worker is no more necessary to an understanding or enjoyment of it, than is a model or anatomy of some tropical tree, to a right tasting of the fruit we are familiar with on the market-stall, —or a geologist's map and stratification, to the prompt recognition of the hill-top, our land-mark of every day" ("ES," 426). By contrast, the subjective poet is "a seer" rather than a maker, in Browning's definition, and thus "what he produces will be less a work than an effluence," one that "cannot be easily considered in abstraction from his personality, —being indeed the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated" ("ES," 426).

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<sup>5</sup> RB, "Essay on Shelley" (1852), in vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Ian Jack, Rowena Fowler, and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford Univ. Press), 424. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated "ES."

James was almost certainly familiar with Browning's essay and the controversy surrounding its publication as the introduction to a cache of newfound letters purported to be from the pen of the late, great Romantic poet.<sup>6</sup> In 1851, publisher Edward Moxon had purchased these hitherto undiscovered missives at auction and planned to issue them in a single-volume supplement to the so-called complete correspondence of Shelley that had appeared under his imprint more than a decade earlier, in 1839. Browning, whose semi-Shelleyan epic *Sordello* (1840) had been published by Moxon at around the same time, was an obvious choice to offer some prefatory remarks to the new volume. For his part, the poet, still very much in Shelley's thrall, was very willing to trumpet the arrival of the new letters, which he—somewhat embarrassingly, as it turned out—proclaimed essential to a true comprehension of “the worldly relations of a poet whose genius has operated by a different law” (“ES,” 424). The volume came out in February 1852.<sup>7</sup> Less than a month later, the so-called Shelley letters were revealed to be forgeries, the work of an imposter who called himself, appropriately, “Major George Gordon Byron.”

Notwithstanding the spurious nature of the epistles themselves, Browning's essay constitutes an important early attempt to grapple with the problem of literary biography, most notably the question of how relevant an author's personal history is to the reader's comprehension of and appreciation for his works, a debate that, as we will see, was of deep importance to literary criticism in the nineteenth century. In the “Essay on Shelley,” Browning asks to what extent biographical information about a poet's life is necessary

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<sup>6</sup> Browning's essay was republished twice during the period in which he and James found themselves in frequent social proximity, first in 1881 by the Browning Society and then again in 1888 by Shelley Society.

<sup>7</sup> For the first edition, see *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley. With an introductory essay, by Robert Browning* (London: Moxon, 1852). A review of the volume—which announced that there was “not much” in the Shelly letters themselves but rather “too much in the prefatory pages by Mr. Browning”—appeared in the *Athenæum* on 21 February of the same year. This was followed by accounts of the forgery on 6 March and 20 March.

and useful for a true understanding his works, a question that—as we will see later—James takes up in *The Aspern Papers*.

Browning's argument was especially troublesome because it was tied to a claim about Shelley's morality, and his defense, however impassioned and well-intentioned, could not change the facts of the poet's life. Within just a few years of Moxon's publication of the spurious missives, another set of letters—these ones legitimate and from the pen of Shelley's first wife, Harriet Westbrook, whom he had abandoned in order to run off with Mary Wollstonecraft's namesake daughter—emerged, revealing the extent of his cruelty. Browning evidently saw some of these letters before their contents became public, thanks to Bond Street bookseller and publisher Thomas Hookham, Jr., a confidante of the first Mrs. Shelley. The poet describes the scene:

He put them into my hands, —and a very decided impression they left with me—the reverse of what I had been prepared for by the biographers of Shelley . . . and . . . all-important for a right view of the case as between wife and husband—the latter being, I hold, at that time of his life, half crazy and wholly inexcusable.<sup>8</sup>

Browning, for whom Shelley had been a kind of poetic god, particularly in the early part of his career, was dismayed as more and more evidence of the latter's misconduct emerged. "I am sadly unsettled in my feelings about Shelley, or rather confirmed in my secret apprehensions, by the recent books," he wrote in 1862.<sup>9</sup> However distasteful he found their contents, Browning evidently persisted in reading such books. Witness a letter from January 1870:

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<sup>8</sup> RB to Frederick J. Furnivall, 29 September [18]83, in *Browning's Trumpeter: The Correspondence of Robert Browning and Frederick J. Furnivall, 1872-1889*, ed. William S. Peterson (Washington, D.C.: Decatur House Press, 1979), 78-79. The exact year that Browning was made privy to these letters has been a point of debate; the general consensus is sometime around 1856.

<sup>9</sup> RB to Isa Blagden, 19 November [18]62, in *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning's Letters to Isabella Blagden*, ed. Edward C. McAleer (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1951), 137.

I have just been reading Shelley's life, as Rossetti tells it—and when I think of how utterly different was the fancy I had of him forty years ago from the facts as they front one today, I can only avoid despising myself by remembering that I judged in pure ignorance and according to the testimony of untruthful friends.<sup>10</sup>

In a letter declining the invitation to become President of the Shelley Society in 1885, he goes so far as to question the value of such organs of veneration and scholarship, especially where deceased authors are concerned. Declaring his acceptance of the presidency “impossible,” he writes:

[I]t would be tantamount to a profession of belief that what the B[rowning] Society has done so helpfully in my case,—mine, who stood in need of it—should now be repeated in the case of Shelley who, for years, has tasked the ingenuity of his admirers to leave no scrap of his writing nor incident of his life without its illustration by every kind of direct or cross light,—*not*—I very much suspect—to the advantage of either.

“For myself—,” he added, “I painfully contrast my notions of Shelley the man and Shelley—well, even the poet,—with what they were sixty years ago, when I only had his works, for a certainty, and took his character on trust.”<sup>11</sup> The disappointment Browning expresses having felt upon this revelation of Shelley's conduct not only recalls James's disappointed reaction to meeting Browning in person but also, as we will see later, finds an important complement in *The Aspern Papers*.

The thrust of Browning's argument initially seems straightforward and intuitive: “the biography of the subjective poet,” he holds, must be a source of “deeper concern” than that of the objective poet because the subjective poet's work is informed by personal

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<sup>10</sup> RB to Isa Blagden, 19 January [18]70, in *Dearest Isa*, 328. McCleer notes that William Morris Rossetti had included a biographical sketch in his 1870 edition of Shelley's verse.

<sup>11</sup> RB to Frederick J. Furnivall, 8 December [18]85, in *Browning's Trumpeter*, 126-27. Furnivall, who served as president of both societies, records in his reminiscences that the poet once “said his father burnt some very valuable letters of Nelson and Byron . . . for fear they should be used to the writers' discredit; and he himself always did the same: let the good of men only live.” F. J. Furnivall, “A Few More Words on Robert Browning,” *Pall Mall Gazette* (18 December 1889): 3.

experience to a greater extent. As Browning puts it, “In our approach to the poetry, we necessarily approach the personality of the [subjective] poet; in apprehending it we apprehend him, and certainly we cannot love it without loving him. Both for love’s and for understanding’s sake we desire to know him[.]” By contrast, the objective poet’s concern is with the world outside his own personal experience.

The terms objective and subjective are not of Browning’s own invention, of course; rather, the dichotomy is one he inherited from the European Romantic tradition of philosophical-literary commentators including the Schlegels and Schiller in Germany and Coleridge in England. M. H. Abrams observes that “from their earliest uses in criticism, the terms . . . were both multiple and variable in their meanings,” and Browning’s essay continues this aspect of the tradition.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the distinction Browning makes between objective and subjective, although ostensibly intended to facilitate arriving at an answer to the question of biographical relevance, does not prove especially helpful in doing so because it obfuscates rather than elucidates their differences.

Let’s look more closely at how Browning delineates these two categories. At the outset of the “Essay on Shelley,” he proclaims:

Doubtless we accept gladly the biography of an objective poet, as the phrase now goes; one whose endeavour has been to reproduce things *external* (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the *manifested* action of the human heart and brain) with an, *immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men*, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction. It has been obtained through the poet’s double faculty of seeing external objects *more clearly*,

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<sup>12</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), 241-44. These terms “would continue to inform and shape critical discussions for years and, as we will see, would take on crucial importance with the rise of modernism. In the introduction to *The Modern Psychological Novel*, for instance, Edel attempts to delimit the scope of his investigation to “fiction *wholly* subjective,” a category into which he places the stream-of-consciousness and the internal monologue novel (v).

*widely, and deeply*, than is possible to the *average mind*, at the same time that he is so acquainted in sympathy with its narrower comprehension as to be careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an *intelligible whole*. (“ES,” 424, my emphasis)

The objective poet, Browning’s description suggests, focuses his attentions on the outside world; on that which is immediately manifest, readily generalizable, and clearly observable; that is, on the empirical, broadly conceived. By this account, then, the work of the objective poet seems to be a function of his relationship to the world beyond himself; to the realm of facts observable to and knowable by other individuals—in other words, by *other minds*, significantly, ones that are “average” in comparison with his own acute sensibilities. The assumption is that the objective poet’s “double faculty of seeing” allows him to distill the vicissitudes of experience for two distinct audiences, both “the intelligences which, save for such assistance, would have missed the deeper meaning and enjoyment of the original objects” and “the spirits of a like endowments with his own, who, by means of his abstract can forthwith pass to the reality it was made from, and either corroborate their impressions of things known already, or supply themselves with new from whatever shows in the inexhaustible variety of existence may have hitherto escaped their knowledge” (“ES,” 425).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In an 1895 address to the Royal Academy, Arthur Wing Pinero described the theater’s influence over mental life—what “dramatic art” could achieve better than any other cultural form—in remarkably similar terms: “[I]ts most substantial claim upon consideration rests in its power of legitimately interesting a great number of people . . . of giving back to the multitude their own thoughts and conceptions illuminated, enlarged, and, if needful, purged, perfected, transfigured” (Quoted in John Darwick, *Pinero: A Theatrical Life* [Niwtot: Univ. Press of Colorado, 1993], 215). Browning’s objective poet frequently has been conflated with the so-called dramatic poet, reflecting the extent to which the dramatic monologue adopts the theater’s relationship to language by trafficking in speech acts. In this vein, see Cornelia D. J. Pearsall, *Tennyson’s Rapture: The Transformation of the Victorian Dramatic Monologue* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008). See also J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2005). The fact that Browning and James both failed in their attempts to write for the stage is interesting to consider here.

“[T]he objective poet,” Browning writes, “in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, chooses to deal with the doings of men,” in order to convey them to men—more specifically to the “common eye” and “narrower comprehension” of his “fellow men,” on whom its “deeper meaning” would otherwise be lost (“ES,” 425). Thus the objective poet represents the world not as he himself perceives it but rather as he *imagines* others to do—or would do, if their minds were “of a like endowment with his own” (“ES,” 425). To produce his poetry, he must project himself into the minds of others in a way that sounds, well, anything but objective.

Indeed, closer inspection reveals that what at first appears to be a fairly straightforward definition—the objective poet as “one whose endeavour [is] to reproduce things external”—gets undercut almost immediately by the examples Browning provides of such putative externalities. Neither “the phenomena of the scenic universe” nor “the manifested action of the human heart and brain” are remotely close to empirical. In this vein, the use of the word “phenomena”—and its placement *prior to* its object, “the scenic universe”—implicitly gestures toward phenomenology’s emphasis on the problematic but inevitable first-person point of view in any account of human consciousness. Similarly, Browning’s mention of the organs of affect and cognition (“heart and brain”)—both decidedly subjective faculties—can be seen as an indication that perceptual and perspectival limitations will feature prominently in the work of the so-called objective poet no less than in the subjective one.

As it turns out, Browning’s description of the subjective poet is markedly similar:

[T]he subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the absolute Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects



that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the workings of his brain. (“ES,” 427, emphasis added)<sup>14</sup>

Contemporary readers were quick to perceive Browning’s subjective/objective distinction as a false dichotomy. An 1856 review of *Men and Women*, for example, lauded the poet’s ability to transcend his own categories “so as to be, not in turn, but simultaneously, lyric and dramatic, subjective and objective.”<sup>15</sup> EBB noted as much in her second letter to him, saying, “You have in your vision two worlds—or to use the language of the day, you are both subjective & objective in the habits of your mind. You can deal both with abstract thought & with human passion in the most passionate sense.” The upshot, as I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, is that Browning’s poetics facilitates a relationship to the reader that is intersubjective.

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As I mentioned earlier, the question of biographical relevance that Browning addresses in the “Essay on Shelley” was fundamental to the rise of literary criticism as a scholarly discipline in the nineteenth century. At the vanguard of this movement was the prolific and influential French writer Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-69). For more than two decades, Sainte-Beuve published a weekly series of newspaper articles—the so-called *Causeries du lundi* (“Monday Chats”), as his column was entitled at first—in

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<sup>14</sup> In a letter to Thomas Carlyle written while he was finishing the Shelley piece, Browning said that the essay was suggested by some of Carlyle’s own remarks. It seems likely that Browning was thinking of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841).

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Milsand, *Revue Contemporaine*, 15 September 1856, quoted in translation by Robert Brainard Pearsall in *Robert Browning* (New York: Twayne, 1974), 17.

which he purported to review new literary works by reconstructing not only the lives but also the *minds* of their authors.<sup>16</sup> A kind of prelude to the psychoanalytic criticism of the mid-twentieth century, the vast majority of Sainte-Beuve's essays—which total over thirty volumes—are what today would be classified as psychological “portraits,” a word that recurs frequently in the titles of his early works.<sup>17</sup> Today Sainte-Beuve is known as the champion of the biographical interpretation of literary works.

In 1862, Sainte-Beuve used the occasion of a two-part *causerie* on Chateaubriand to respond to detractors who objected that his biographical portraiture lacked a coherent, consistent methodology. In that piece, which has been translated as “The Natural History of Minds: An Outline of a Critical Method,” Sainte-Beuve maintains that literary texts, as the expressions of human beings, are by nature subjective. For this reason, he argues, to study literature objectively—to “penetrate to the truth as a scientist does”—requires the critic to focus *not* on the work itself but rather on the author who produced it.<sup>18</sup> He writes:

For me, literature, the production of an author, is not distinct or at any rate not separable from the rest of the man and his make-up. I can relish a work by itself, but I find it hard to judge it apart from a knowledge of the man who wrote it; I am quite willing to say, “As the tree, so is its fruit.” (“NHM,” 1)

Note, here, again, the emphasis placed on judgment: Sainte-Beuve put great stock in the role of the critic as judge. Note, too, that he expresses the same belief that got Browning into trouble vis-à-vis Shelley, namely the idea that a man's literary works can be seen as

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<sup>16</sup> The title of Sainte-Beuve's column was changed to *Nouveaux lundis* (“New Monday”) when he switched from his initial publisher, the French newspaper *Le Constitutionnel*, to *Le Moniteur* and, later, *Le Temps*.

<sup>17</sup> These include: *Critiques et portraits littéraires* (5 vol., 1832-39); *Portraits littéraires* (1844); *Portraits des femmes* (1844); and *Portraits contemporains* (1846). For more on Sainte-Beuve and his individual works, see his entry in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2005), 831-33.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, “The Natural History of Minds: An Outline of a Critical Method” (1862), in *Literary Criticism of Sainte-Beuve*, ed. and trans. Emerson R. Marks. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1971), 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated “NHM.”

evidence of his moral deeds and vice versa. Browning, however, felt this to be true only in regard to the subjective poet, and perhaps only—however briefly—in regard to Shelley in particular. Some ten years before Sainte-Beuve upheld the maxim “As is the tree, so is its fruit,” that is, Browning had proclaimed that the objective poet’s “biography . . . is no more necessary to an understanding or enjoyment of [the work], than is a model or anatomy of some tropical tree, to the right tasting of the fruit we are familiar with on the market-stall” (“ES,” 426).

Sainte-Beuve disagreed. He believed that literary studies—in tandem with mental science—was moving inexorably toward a taxonomic system like the one used to classify biological species. “A day will come, which I think I have glimpsed in the course of my observations, when . . . the great families of minds and their principle divisions will be determined and known,” he declares at the outset of the “The Natural History of Minds” (“NHM,” 2).<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding such progressive optimism, Sainte-Beuve insists that the evolving methods he champions can only be applied to modern writers. Accordingly, he holds that insight into the work of the ancients—he names Plato, Sophocles, and Virgil—is not possible due to a “lack of any means of gathering information or recovering the facts” about such “great men of antiquity” (“NHM,” 2). According to Sainte-Beuve, the facts necessary for the genuine comprehension of a given writer include, first and most importantly, “his native region and family background,” including his “physiological ancestry” (“NHM,” 3); second, his “studies and education” (“NHM,” 5); and, last but not

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<sup>19</sup> It bears noting that, for all his reliance on it, Sainte-Beuve warns that the analogy with science should not be pressed too far: “Of course, in studying men we shall never be able to proceed in quite the same way as in studying animals or plants. Human nature is more complex, endowed with what we call *liberty*, which in each case admits of a great variety of possible combinations” (“NHM,” 2). Along the same lines, he grants that this new ‘scientific’ approach need not herald the obsolescence of rhetorical criticism: “No one expects to employ laboratory methods on traditional occasions or before every kind of audience” (“NHM,” 8).

least, “his earliest society, the group of friends and contemporaries he associated with at the moment his talent showed itself, when it first took on definite, mature form”

(“NHM,” 5). “A critic can hardly avail himself of too many means and methods for comprehending a man, by which I mean something more than a pure detached intellect,” Sainte-Beuve proclaims (“NMH,” 11). He then lists a series of questions whose answers he regards as essential to understanding a writer’s œuvre:

What were his religious opinions? How did he respond to natural scenery? What was his attitude toward women? toward money? Was he rich or poor? What was his daily routine, his activities on a typical day? etc. Finally, what was his vice or weakness?—for every man has one. Not a single one of these questions is irrelevant in evaluating the author of a book or the book itself . . . above all if it is a literary work, that is, something in which everything may have a place. (“NHM,” 11)

For Sainte-Beuve, in other words, there is no such thing as an objective poet, a view with which the narrator of *The Aspern Papers* undoubtedly would concur.

According to Edel, James first read Sainte-Beuve in 1862-63, during the year he spent at Harvard Law School, and regarded his discovery of the French critic as a “sacred date” in the development of his historical and aesthetic consciousness.<sup>20</sup> As an aspiring writer, James certainly held Sainte-Beuve in the highest regard. “Truly,” he wrote to his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry in 1867, when he was reading the *Nouveaux lundis* as they emerged in the weekly French newspaper *Le Constitutionnel*, “exquisite criticism can’t further go.” The letter continues:

. . . the English literature and spirit is a thing which we tacitly assume that we know much more of than we actually do. . . . Our vast literature and literary history is to most of us an unexplored field—especially when we compare it to what the French is to the French.—Deep in the timorous recesses of my being is a vague desire to do for our dear old English letters and writers *something*

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<sup>20</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 1:198.

of what Ste. Beuve and the best French critics have done for theirs. . . . I don't mean that I should like to imitate him, or reproduce him in English: but only that I should like to acquire something of his intelligence and his patience and vigour. One feels—I feel at least, that he is a man of the past, of a dead generation; and that we young Americans are (without cant) men of the future.<sup>21</sup>

We find James's first critical treatment of Sainte-Beuve in an 1868 review in the *Nation* that assesses *Portraits of Celebrated Women*, a newly translated selection of the Frenchman's essays on eighteenth-century women writers—"persons not especially dear to the American public" and even "in a fair way to be[ing] forgotten in France," as James phrases it at the outset.<sup>22</sup> What is most interesting about this piece is its equivocation with respect to method; however much the young James esteemed Sainte-Beuve's contribution to letters, this early review makes it apparent that he also felt, even early in his career—that is, well before he became famous enough to harbor fears about the violation of his personal privacy—a certain degree of conflict about the biographical approach. Part of his concern stems from a sense that the publication of extracts by these "departed women of talent," together with Sainte-Beuve's research into and commentary upon their lives, has, rather than elevating their posthumous reputations, actually done them a grave disservice (*LC*, 665). He objects to what he regards as the "sad and spectral" exhumation of "these poor old French ladies," whom he describes having been "summoned from their quiet graves, deep in the warm and comfortable soil of oblivion, and clad afresh in the chilly drapery of our American speech" (*LC*, 665).<sup>23</sup> He writes:

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<sup>21</sup> HJ to Thomas Sergeant Perry, in *HJ Letters*, 1:76-77.

<sup>22</sup> HJ, rev. of *Portraits of Celebrated Women* by C. A. Sainte-Beuve, trans. H. W. Preston, repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 664. References to all of James's reviews of Sainte-Beuve refer to this edition; after the first instance, each will be cited parenthetically and abbreviated *LC*.

<sup>23</sup> As this remark suggests, James takes issue with the decision to translate Sainte-Beuve into English at all; he insists, here and elsewhere, that the both French critic and the writers he deems it fit to study deserve—demand—to be read in the original. "For our own part, we should have wholly deprecated any translation,"

M. Sainte-Beuve . . . said a good word for each [of the women he discusses in the volume]; but did he arrest the wave of oblivion? On the contrary, his word was doubtless felt to be the last word, and his heroines received their quietus. . . . To read and enjoy his various articles must have seemed to ordinary readers an all-sufficient tribute . . . They read M. Sainte-Beuve's extracts, and this was quite enough." (*LC*, 664)

James objects that Sainte-Beuve's treatment of these women writers is not critical in that it does not evaluate the merits and flaws of their works with objectivity. As James puts it, "the author's tone is by no means the pure judicial one" (*LC*, 666). He insists that Sainte-Beuve's capacity for "fairness"—for assessing these literary works on their own terms—has been compromised by his "devotion" to the female sex, toward which, according to James, he "maintains an emphatically sentimental relation" (*LC*, 666-67). James writes:

M. Sainte-Beuve repays himself for his own effusion of sentiment by detecting and pursuing the emotion in the lives of his heroines. Assuredly, it is not directed toward himself; but this is of small account. Provided it is really the process, the act of love, he is quite content to be but a spectator. (*LC*, 667)

In his description of the Sainte-Beuve's "content[ment]" at being "but a spectator" to "the process, the act of love," James implies that what the Frenchman is doing amounts not so much criticism as *voyeurism*. The aspect of Sainte-Beuve's method that strikes him most forcefully is the "insatiable curiosity" that motivates it (*LC*, 668). Sainte-Beuve, he suggests, is peering through the keyhole into the *boudoir* of women writers, whom, he

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James proclaims in his review of *Portraits of Celebrated Women*, "but if such a work had been determined upon, we should have suggested a selection of articles from the immense repository of the 'Causeries du Lundi,'" a work the novelist regards as superior both for its display of critical acumen and for its subject matter. Ironically, however, when a translation of excerpts from the *Causeries du Lundi* finally did appear a few years later, in 1875, under the title *English Portraits*, James—once again reviewing the volume for the *Nation*—voiced the same objection. His review of *English Portraits* begins as follows:

It may be said that if it is of no particular profit to translate Sainte-Beuve into English, it at least does no harm. Those who care to read him will be sure to be able, and to prefer, to read him in his own tongue, and those who do not will let him alone, as before. To this may be answered, we think, that a performance like the present volume sins in being a spurious rather than a real service to culture; that Sainte-Beuve, of all men, was devoted to culture in its purest and most incorruptible forms; and that it is therefore paying him a poor compliment to present him in a fashion based on a compromise with sound taste.

HJ, rev. of *English Portraits* by C. A. Sainte-Beuve, repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 673.

insinuates, the French critic “chiefly values” not for their contribution to *belles lettres* so much as for their romantic exploits (*LC*, 666). Here we can think of Sartre’s description of the look, the moment of *being seen*:

Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone and on the level of a non-thetic self-consciousness. This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are in no way *known*; *I am my acts* and hence they carry in themselves their whole justification.<sup>24</sup>

“It is not as that of a novelist that the mystical [Baroness Barbara Juliane von] Krüdener’s ghost of a name appears to us,” James notes wryly (*LC*, 664).

Accordingly, James objects to Sainte-Beuve’s “sketch of a certain Madame de Pontivy,” who, he complains, “was in no sense of the word a celebrated woman; she was not even a literary woman” (*LC*, 667). As James sees it, “[h]er sole claim to our interest is her love-story—the fact that for a large number of years . . . in the midst of a faithless and licentious society, she maintained privately, and yet in all its fullness, a passion of the most exquisite quality” (*LC*, 668). James suggests that the value of this passion resides in its privacy and continues with a damning indictment of Sainte-Beuve:

There is nothing in the story but that; no wit, nor wisdom, nor action. . . . M. Sainte-Beuve relates it with excellent skill, and with the most generous sympathy and unction. But that he should relate such a story in such a manner is conclusive evidence that he is very little of a moralist and . . . not overmuch of a thinker. (*LC*, 668)

James insists that the non-fictional volume’s “literary merit . . . so far exceeds its merits in other particulars that it seems futile to look upon it as anything but a contribution to pure literature” (*LC*, 668). This is an unusual claim, since the writers Sainte-Beuve treats are historical personages and not mere fictional creations, as James admits when he notes

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<sup>24</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 347.

that Sainte-Beuve's is first and foremost "a psychologist—an empiric" (*LC*, 668).

James's review therefore concludes on a note of ambivalence:

[Sainte-Beuve] is a little of a poet, a little of a moralist, a little of a historian, a little of a philosopher, a little of a romancer. But successively, with patience and care, you detect each of these characters in its littleness—you detect the wonderful man in flagrant default of imagination, of depth, of sagacity, of constructive skill, and you feel that he is reduced to logical proportions. At the same time you feel that there is another element of his mind which looks small from no point of view, but which remains immeasurable, original, and delightful. (*LC*, 668)

Seven years later, James had occasion to review another work by Sainte-Beuve, a volume of the *Lundi* essays for which the Frenchman, who had passed away in 1869, was most famous. This rarely examined piece, the second of what ultimately would be a total of five essays on Sainte-Beuve written across the novelist's career, offers key insight into James's evolving—and sometimes conflicting—views on biographical criticism. James's review, which appeared in the *Nation* on 18 February 1875, opens with the observation that Sainte-Beuve had "spent much of the latter part of his life in revising his published writings, amending them, minutely annotating, and generally re-editing them" in order to produce "a series of 'authorized editions' of all his principal performances."<sup>25</sup> Likening Sainte-Beuve's obsessive self-revisions to making "a certain toilet for his productions," James suggests that the process was motivated by the wish to control "their appearance before posterity" (*LC*, 669). In this review, James quoted the French critic's lengthy justification for undertaking the massive revision necessary to produce such authorized editions.

"I save what I can of the damaged baggage; I wish that what I reject might perish wholly and leave no trace. Unfortunately, this

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<sup>25</sup> HJ, rev. of *Premiers Lundis* by C. A. Sainte-Beuve, *Nation* (18 February 1875), repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 669.



cannot be; what one collects into stout volumes is not saved by that fact, and what remains in scattered sheets is not so completely lost that it does not drag in one's track and weigh down, if need be, one's literary march and, later, one's memory (if a memory there is to be), with a multitude of confused and straggling reminiscences. It is proper, then, to answer only for what one has admitted, and, without disavowing the rest, to send it to the bottom. In a word, if one has a care for the future, if, without having the vanity of believing in anything in the way of glory, one feels at least the lawful desire to be in some rank or other an honorable witness to one's time, one has all precautions to take: one cannot too much act as a ship (*faire navire*), and keep one's course straight, to pass, without foundering, the perilous straits." (LC, 669)

Noting that the Frenchman died before he could give such treatment to this particular volume of critical writings—which James calls “groping experiments in the line in which he subsequently became a master”—the novelist declares it “a vast pity that, since they were to be exhumed, [Sainte-Beuve] himself should not have presided at the ceremony” (LC, 670). Sainte-Beuve, James feels sure, “would have supplied them with a number of entertaining notes, and given many valuable glimpses of the history of the formation of his opinions” (LC, 670).

James characterizes the papers as “slight” (LC, 672) and describes reading them as “like seeing a person thrust half-dressed into company” (LC, 670). Still, he concludes, “[t]he merit of these papers is evidently greater” than one might imagine, for “they seem to us to contain the distinct promise of the author's future” (LC, 670). While “[t]he grasp may here and there lack firmness,” he writes, the hand clearly belongs to “a master,” and therefore these early pieces retain lasting value as the “verdant first-fruits of a man of extraordinary genius” (LC, 673). James pointedly does not argue that these writings are important in and of themselves; their significance, he insists, is due to what Sainte-Beuve subsequently went on to achieve as a critic. In other words, the early writings are

endowed with meaning *ex post facto* because they provide insight into the development of a great mind. This is an argument very much in keeping with Sainte-Beuve's own sense of what criticism ought to do. James writes:

*We confess that, touching such a man as Sainte-Beuve, our curiosity is infinite; we feel as if we could never learn enough about him.* His intellectual fecundity was so unbounded that one imagines that the history of his individual opinions would throw a preternaturally brilliant light upon the laws of the human mind at large. We are thankful to learn from his present editor that such a history is to receive a valuable contribution in the publication of his letters, as completely as possible. (*LC*, 672-73, emphasis added)

The publication of Sainte-Beuve's correspondence, James declares, "will set the seal of completeness on a truly magnificent literary record" (*LC*, 673). (Reviewing these volumes of "the great critic's general correspondence" when they eventually appeared several years later, James once more trumpeted their publication as "a capital piece of literary good news" as well as a "prospect of high entertainment," although, as we will see shortly, they ultimately left him unfulfilled.)<sup>26</sup> My point is that, early in his career and with respect to the most biographically minded of critics, James expresses a voyeuristic curiosity, even a certain zeal for the revelation of personal information.

A few months later, we find James, in his third review of Sainte-Beuve for *The Nation*, expressing more conflicted feeling about the biographical method of literary criticism, this time primarily in reference to the writer's posthumous reputation. As before, James opens by suggesting that the work under review—this time a selection of Sainte-Beuve's translated essays on a variety of English writers—should not have been published at all. The reason James gives for this rather severe pronouncement is that the

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<sup>26</sup> HJ, rev. of *Correspondence de C. A. Sainte-Beuve (1822-69)*, *North American Review* 130 (January 1880), repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 679.

pieces in question “are not among his best,” and, as the novelist sees it, “to serve up half-a-dozen of Sainte-Beuve’s second-best *Causeries* as an English book is to be at odds with the very spirit of Sainte-Beuve.”<sup>27</sup> The issue, James makes clear, is a matter of not “doing [Sainte-Beuve] justice,” for “a reader whose sole knowledge of the great critic should be derived from these pages would carry away an extremely vague and formless image” of his work (*LC*, 674). Such injustice, James goes on to note, affects not only the author but everyone “within range of Sainte-Beuve’s reference”:

We should fancy that among the people of the day . . . there must have been a certain special, well-known physical sensation associated with a glimpse of their names in these terrible notes. There was no knowing what was coming: he never spoke save by book; what documents had he got hold of now? (*LC*, 676)

Note, here, the emphasis on the visceral nature of the experience—the “physical sensation” of glimpsing one’s own name in those “terrible notes”—and the material nature of the documents, both of which will prove to be important in *The Aspern Papers*.

James strikes a similar chord in a short a short piece entitled “Letter from Paris” that appeared in the *New York Tribune* in May 1876 noting the appearance of two more posthumously collected volumes of Sainte-Beuve. “The literary remains of Sainte-Beuve are being brought to light with merciless energy,” James remarks in acknowledging the arrival of the two new volumes, *Chroniques Parisiennes* and *Cahiers de Sainte-Beuve*, within mere “weeks of each other.”<sup>28</sup> He continues, remarking on his own diction:

I use the word “merciless” rather with regard to the great critic’s victims than to his own reputation. The emptying of table-drawers and memoranda after an eminent writer’s death has always a disagreeable and painful side, but if this posthumous rummaging is ever justifiable it may pass in the case of Sainte-Beuve. (*LC*, 678)

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<sup>27</sup> HJ, rev. of *English Portraits*, repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 674.

<sup>28</sup> HJ, “Letter from Paris,” *New York Tribune* (13 May 1876), repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 678.

This passage marks an important moment in James's thinking about the ethics of access to what is referred to in *The Aspern Papers* as a writer's personal "relics." He reiterates that Sainte-Beuve "belonged to that only small order of minds for which it may be claimed that their lightest thoughts and utterances have a value" (*LC*, 678). James maintains that it is "interesting"—even enlightening—"to have a glimpse of his literary practice—to see how he lived pen in hand and took notes not only upon what he read but upon what he heard, thought, felt and dreamed" (*LC*, 678). James clearly regards Sainte-Beuve as "one of the people on whom nothing is lost," as he phrases it in his essay "The Art of Fiction," and therefore he suggests that no remnant of Sainte-Beuve's literary practice should be lost: all of the Frenchman's "remains" should be preserved.<sup>29</sup> Still, the potential downside of such a record is apparent to James, who observes that "some of [Sainte-Beuve's] friends and acquaintances will be more interested than gratified to read the notes and observations he made upon their conversation and talents for his own use" (*LC*, 678). Here we find evidence of a slight ambivalence in James's attitude toward Sainte-Beuve and the biographical method, accompanied by a burgeoning awareness of concerns about the privacy issues raised by that method.

James reviewed Sainte-Beuve yet again upon the publication of the French critic's correspondence in 1878. "He spent his life in analyzing and pondering other people, and it was a matter of course that he also should be put into the scales," James writes, thereby acknowledging that the publication of Sainte-Beuve's letters effectively makes the critic

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<sup>29</sup> HJ, "The Art of Fiction" (1884, rev. 1888), repr. in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, Etc.*, 53. Not coincidentally, in this same essay James famously declares that "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer" (64).

subject to the kind of judgment he typically metes out.<sup>30</sup> In what seems like a remarkable shift, James no longer regards Sainte-Beuve's letters as essential. Though he maintains that "[i]n the history of such a mind every autobiographical touch has a high interest," he does not insist that this is the case where these letters are concerned (*LC*, 689).

It was from himself always that he spoke—from his own personal and intimate point of view. He wrote himself down in his published pages, and what was left for his letters was simply to fill in the details, to supply a few missing touches, a few inflections and shades. . . . There is [in the letters] very little overflow of his personal situation, of his movements and adventures, of the incident of his life. (*LC*, 680)

This is a significant reformulation of the relationship between a writer's personal life and his published work. Sainte-Beuve's correspondence, James suggests, is unnecessary because the critic's work itself "offers a singularly complete image of his character, his tastes, his temper, his idiosyncrasies" (*LC*, 680). The mind is always already in the work:

[N]o writer was ever more personal, more certain, in the long run, to infuse into his judgments of people and things those elements out of which an image of himself might be constructed. The whole of the man was in the special work. (*LC*, 679)

In reviewing Sainte-Beuve's correspondence, James celebrates the Frenchman's willingness to exercise his capacity for judgment without fear of reprisal. Sainte-Beuve is upheld as a champion of "the cause of liberty" "defending [the critic's] position as a free observer and appreciator" (*LC*, 684). James describes how, when the daughter of an eminent man of letters, recently deceased, objected to "certain points in his judgment of her father," for whom Sainte-Beuve had written a biographical notice, the critic "offered

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<sup>30</sup> HJ, rev. of *Correspondence de C. A. Sainte-Beuve (1822-69)*, *North American Review* 130 (January 1880), repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 682. "I know there are quite too many 'I's in my Sainte-Beuve—this shocked me very much when I saw it in print, and they would never have stayed had I seen it in proof," James later wrote to his father about this piece (HJ to Henry James, Sr., 11 January 1880, in *HJ Letters*, 2:264). As we will see in Chapter 4, this stands in stark contrast to his anonymous essay on Browning's funeral, which completely avoids the first-person perspective.

to withdraw the article altogether, but he refused to alter a word” (*LC*, 685). He gives several examples in this vein and, notes that his own “impression was the thing in the world he most valued,” James lauds Sainte-Beuve for his staunch insistence that it was not only the critic’s right but his duty to give expression to those impressions (*LC*, 685).

He quotes at length from a Sainte-Beuve letter:

“Is it not necessary,” [Sainte-Beuve] asks, “to break with that false conventionality that system of cant, which declares that we shall judge a writer not only by his intentions, but by his pretensions? It is time that this should come to an end. . . . Am I to see nothing . . . but the great master, polished, noble, elegant, trimmed with fur, religious—not the quick, impetuous, abrupt, sensual man that he was? . . . Must one go on praising his noble, lofty sentiments, as is done invariably all around him? And, as this is the reverse of the truth, must one be a dupe and continue to dupe others? Are men of letters, historians and moralistic preachers nothing more than comedians, whom one has no right to take on outside of the *rôle* that they have arranged for themselves? Must one see them only on the stage and look at them only while they are there?” (*LC*, 686-87)

Sainte-Beuve maintains that a crucial part of the critic’s role is to “show the *seam* . . . between the talent and the soul; to praise the one, but to mark also the defect of the other” (*LC*, 687). Important here is the emphasis on *personal* qualities of the writer and the critical judgment of those qualities. Criticism should *not* amount to “the worship of idols” (*LC*, 687). Sainte-Beuve’s approach, as James’s characterizes it, is driven by his “intense interest in the truth of any matter, his desire to arrive at the most just and comprehensive perception of it, his delight in the labor involved in such attempts” (682), as well as “his passion for detail, for exactitude and completeness, for facts and examples” (683).

Ultimately, James concludes, Saint-Beuve, “himself was more complex than any figure he ever drew, and he could only have been adequately painted in colors from his own palette (*LC*, 675). Interestingly, Percy Lubbock later made the very same argument

about James himself, stating that “[w]hen Henry James wrote the reminiscences of his youth he shewed conclusively, that indeed could be doubtful to none who knew him, that it would be impossible for anyone else to write his life.” James’s life, as Lubbock saw it, “was no mere succession of facts, such as could be compiled and recorded by another hand; it was a densely knit cluster of emotions and memories, each one steeped in lights and colours thrown out by the rest, the whole making up a picture that no one but himself could dream of undertaking to paint.”<sup>31</sup> Here one thinks of James’s own observation on the art of biography in *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*:

To live over people’s lives is nothing unless we live over their perceptions, live over the growth, the chance, the varying intensity of the same—since it was *by* these things they themselves lived. . . . The fond inquiry would be (in the interest, as I say, of living over people’s perceptions) as to how such things take place, as to how such dramas, as it were, with all the staked beliefs, invested hopes, throbbing human intensities they involve in ruin, enact themselves.<sup>32</sup>

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Sainte-Beuve’s reputation has waned since the nineteenth century. While there is no doubt that his writings were known to both Browning and James, today he is famous less for his own trenchant critiques than for the pointed attack levied on them by Marcel Proust. In a posthumous collection of essayistic fragments entitled *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1954)—a strange hybrid of personal narrative, existential reflection, and literary criticism that was discovered in manuscript upon his death—Proust vehemently rejects Sainte-Beuve’s biographical approach to literary studies, condemning what he saw as its

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<sup>31</sup> Percy Lubbock, introduction to *The Letters of Henry James*, 2 vol., ed. Lubbock (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 1:xiii.

<sup>32</sup> HJ, *William Wetmore Story*, 1:125.

failure to grasp the intricacies of the creative process, to comprehend the essence of the writer's mind.

Arguably the most complete embodiment of twentieth-century modernism's lyric turn came from across the Channel, in the form of Proust's semi-autobiographical *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the first part of which (*Du côté de chez Swann*) appeared in 1913, during the waning years of James's life.<sup>33</sup> Crucial to Proust's conceptualization of this seven-volume masterpiece is the unfinished *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.<sup>34</sup> In the volume's core essay, entitled "The Method of Sainte-Beuve," Proust explains why he feels that Sainte-Beuve—long regarded as "the peerless master of nineteenth-century criticism"—has "sinned as a writer and as a critic" and advances his own view of "what criticism should do and what art is."<sup>35</sup> Proust begins by acknowledging what is widely understood as Sainte-Beuve's "special achievement," the advent of a new critical method, which Proust describes as having "elicited from the biography of the man, from his family history, and from all his peculiarities, the sense of his work and the nature of his genius" ("MS-B," 95). But while not disputing the significance of Sainte-Beuve's methodological innovation as such, Proust vehemently objects to some of its attendant implications. In particular, he opposes the notion that literary criticism should be predicated on the ability to, as he puts it, "surround oneself with every possible piece of information about a writer, to collate his letters, to pick the brains of those who knew him, talking to them if they are alive, [and] reading whatever they may have written about him if they are dead"

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<sup>33</sup> The English translation of Proust's work is *Remembrance of Things Past* or *In Search of Lost Time*.

<sup>34</sup> *Against Sainte-Beuve*; also translated as *By Way of Sainte-Beuve*. By most accounts, Proust intermittently worked on this volume until 1909, at which point he abandoned the idea of publishing it as a critical study and began reworking some of its material into the novel that became *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

<sup>35</sup> Marcel Proust, "The Method of Sainte-Beuve," in *On Art and Literature, 1896-1919*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (New York: Meridian, 1957), 99, 94, 94. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated "MS-B."



("MS-B," 99). Such mundane details, according to Proust, are largely if not completely irrelevant, for they are "precisely . . . where the poet's true self is not involved" ("MS-B," 107). For Proust, "the writer's true self is manifested in his books alone" ("MS-B," 106), and thus it is to the works themselves that we must turn if we hope to understand the mind of the author. He finds it ludicrous "to suppose that one fine morning the truth will arrive by post in the form of an unpublished letter submitted to us by a friend's librarian" ("MS-B," 100).

Sainte-Beuve's biographical method, Proust alleges, "consists of not separating the man and his work" ("MS-B," 99) and therefore rests upon a "shallow conception of the creative mind" ("MS-B," 107). He writes:

At no time does Sainte-Beuve seem to have understood that there is something special about creative writing and that this makes it different in kind from what busies other men and, at other times, busies writers. He drew no dividing line between the state of being engaged in a piece of writing and the state when in solitude, stopping our ears against those phrases which belong to others as much as to us, and which whenever we are not truly ourselves, even though we may be alone, we make use of in our consideration of things, we confront ourselves and try to catch the true voice of the heart, and to write down that, and not small-talk. ("MS-B," 103)

"[A] book," Proust declares, "is the product of a different *self* from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices" ("MS-B," 100). For this reason, he insists that "having been a friend of [the author's]" does not "make one better fitted to judge him" ("MS-B," 100). What the writer shows to the world, even to his friends, "is merely a man of the world like themselves" ("MS-B," 106).

In fact, it is the secretion of one's innermost life, written in solitude and for oneself alone, that one gives to the public. What one bestows on private life . . . is the product of a quite superficial self, not of the innermost self which one can only recover by putting

aside the world and the self that frequents the world; that innermost self which has waited while one was in company, which one feels certain is the only real self, and which artists—and they only—end by living for, like a god whom they less and less often depart from, and to whom they have sacrificed a life that has no purpose except to do him honor. (“MS-B,” 104)

According to Proust, “Nothing of [the poet] remains in the main, the everyday man who goes out to dinner and has his ambitions; and it is from this one, who has kept none of it, that Sainte-Beuve claims to extract the essence of the other.” He remarks:

. . . any man who shares his skin with a man of genius has very little in common with the other inmate, yet it is he who is known by the genius’s friends, so it is absurd to judge the poet by the man, or by the report of his friends, as Sainte-Beuve did.<sup>36</sup>

Proust maintains that, in “failing to see the gulf that separates the writer from the man of the world,” Sainte-Beuve is prevented from being able “to understand that world apart, shuttered and sealed against all traffic with the outer world, the poet’s soul” (“MS-B,” 106). Proust asserts that the works of both the critic and the journalist are “less personal” than—and, he seems to insinuate, inferior to—those of the creative writer because the former are “composed with the unwitting collaboration of other people” (“MS-B,” 112). He ends by wondering “if after all Sainte-Beuve’s best work is not his poetry” (“MS-B,” 118). Poetry, Proust suggests, is the truest expression of the *moi profond*, that sacred, creative version of the self that emerges only in solitary contemplation.

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“I am so out of sympathy with all this ‘biographical matter’ connected with works which ought to stand or fall by their own merits quite independently of the writer’s life

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<sup>36</sup> Proust, “Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire,” in *On Art and Literature*, 127-28.

and habits, that I prefer leaving my poems to speak for themselves as best they can—and so to end as I began long ago,” declared Robert Browning in a letter to George Smith, his longtime publisher, in November 1887.<sup>37</sup>

Browning’s irritation with “all this biographical matter,” along with his assertion that literary works “ought to stand or fall by their own merits quite independently of the writer’s life” is a pointed rebuke of Sainte-Beuve, and one that is not entirely consistent with the view he had espoused decades earlier in the “Essay on Shelley.” Perhaps not surprisingly, in introducing what he then believed to be a newly discovered cache of Shelley letters, the younger Browning seems to have felt obliged to trumpet the value of such documents—in the case of the subjective poet, at any rate. He writes:

Letters and poems may be used indifferently as the basement of our opinion upon the writer’s character; the finished expression of a sentiment in the poems, giving light and significance to the same in the letters, and these, again, in their incipency and unripeness, authenticating the exalted mood and reattaching it to the personality of the writer. (“ES,” 434)

Here Browning suggests that letters and poems are mutually illuminating; together they enhance the reader’s understanding of the “character” and “personality” of the writer. It is interesting, especially given his later remarks, that in the “Essay on Shelley” he maintains that the two types of writing are sufficiently similar that they “may be used indifferently” in this regard. “Letters and poems,” he continues, “are obviously an act of the *same* mind, produced by the *same* law, only differing in the application to the individual or collective understanding” (“ES,” 433, emphasis added). This observation points to what seems like a crucial difference between the two—letters are composed to read by a specific person, while poems are composed for a broader audience—but the Browning of 1852 chooses to

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<sup>37</sup> RB to George Smith, 12 November 1887, quoted in Philip Kelley and William S. Peterson, “Browning’s Final Revisions,” *Browning Institute Studies* 1 (1973): 91.

focus on the fact that both are the products of the “same mind.” In this vein, Browning is pleased to report that the new Shelley correspondence contains “nothing of that jarring between the man and the author, which has been found so amusing or so melancholy; no dropping of the tragic mask, as the crowd melts away” (“ES,” 434). With this image of the mask dropping as the crowd disperses, Browning in effect admits the possibility of a discontinuity between a writer’s public, performing self and his private counterpart. The admission is significant in light of the social mask that James perceived Browning to be wearing at all times and in view of the theatrical ventriloquism that, ironically, became the poet’s most recognizable voice.

Even in 1852, of course, Browning considered himself an objective poet and thus would have argued that his own life and letters were immaterial to his verse. But much had changed in the following decades. For one thing, he had learned that Shelley was not the man he had so passionately defended in the “Essay.” In addition, after EBB’s passing in 1861, he found himself not only besieged with requests to publish her correspondence but sometimes even confronted with unauthorized editions of the same. In the meantime, the biographical method championed by Sainte-Beuve had been gaining momentum, to the point that it has become a dominant tendency in literary criticism; at the same time, Browning’s own popularity both at home and abroad had soared to new heights. With the awareness that his years were dwindling even as the public clamored for more and more details about his personal life, especially his marriage (not to mention an endless flurry of rumors of subsequent romantic entanglements), Browning knew that the privacy he had so fiercely guarded was in serious jeopardy.

Browning's letters to Isa Blagden are filled with reminders that they are intended for her eyes only: "To begin and to end, —these notes are *always private*, you know, and I trust," he wrote in one of his earliest letters after returning to England in the summer of 1862.<sup>38</sup> Two months later, he repeated the injunction: "Remember, I read your letters, twice, and then burn them: mine, I trust,—earnestly conjure you will never show: but you will not."<sup>39</sup> The enjoinder highlights Browning's complex feelings about correspondence. What begins in the guise of a reminder, one that implicitly expresses a wish for Isa to follow his example, is transformed into a command that also serves as a form of self-reassurance. It is as though Browning wants to believe that he can will Isa to comply by putting it in writing.

Earlier that year, Browning had been distraught when the son of the late writer Leigh Hunt had published a letter he and Elizabeth had written to the deceased, an epistle "full of intimate talk about our child's [Pen's] illness, and other things which give me real pain to read," he fumed indignantly:

Think of doing this without one word of enquiry as to whether I would allow such a liberty—which means,—taking care not to receive the inevitable refusal. Once I should have been angry enough—now, I seem hardly to care after the first feeling of disgust and annoyance—it is as if some clownish person had thrown open the door of a bathing-machine in which I was undressing—the whole company on the beach stare and probably laugh—and a very young lady would be mortified enough,—but I shall not break my heart, depend on it.<sup>40</sup>

The intensity of the poet's outburst belies the assertion that he "seem[s] hardly to care."

This was only the beginning, however; one letter would soon seem a small matter indeed.

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<sup>38</sup> RB to Isabella Blagden, 19 June [18]62, in *Dearest Isa*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> RB to Isa Blagden, 18 August [18]62, in *Dearest Isa*, 117.

<sup>40</sup> RB to Isa Blagden, 7 March [1862], in *Dearest Isa*, 102. Recall that James used a nearly identical image in his 1875 review of Sainte-Beuve's *Premiers Lundis*, which he compared to "seeing a person thrust half-dressed into company" (*Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 670).

Six months later, he wrote to Isa once more: “Ever since I set foot in England, I have been pestered with applications for leave to write the Life of my wife: I have refused—and there an end.” As Browning went on to explain, a man named George Stampe was planning a biography of EBB and making inquiries about “details of life and letters” from members of the couple’s circle. Again, Browning reacted intensely to the invasion:

Think of this beast working away at this, not deeming my feelings, or those of her family, worthy of notice—and meaning to print letters written years and years ago, on the most intimate and personal subjects, . . . what I suffer in feeling the hands of these blackguards (for I forgot to say, *another* man has been making similar applications to friends)—what I undergo with their paws in my very bowels, you can guess & God knows!

The letter ends with Browning averring that, “it [publication] shall not be done if I can stop the scamp’s knavery—along with his breath!”<sup>41</sup> This would be a recurrent theme—and an ever-present threat—for the remainder of Browning’s life.

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In 1877, James reviewed an unauthorized collection of EBB’s letters, which was penned at the same time his own letters reveal him to have been encountering Robert Browning with a frequency that did not diminish the older poet’s perplexity. In his review, James confronted the question about the value of letters Browning had raised in the “Essay on Shelley.” He writes:

As nothing in the way of a memoir of the lady who may fairly be spoken of as the first of the world’s women-poets had hitherto been published, and as no other letters from her hand had, to our knowledge, ever been given to the world, these two volumes will be held by her admirers to have a biographical value—perhaps

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<sup>41</sup> RB to Isa Blagden, 19 January [18]63, in *Dearest Isa*, 148-49.

even to supply in some degree a sensible want. We may add that they will be read with hardly less pleasure by Mrs. Browning's colder critics.<sup>42</sup>

Observe, here, James's caginess, his equivocation: he carefully does not assert that *he* believes the volumes to have "biographical value"—his own critical judgment is limited to describing the correspondence as "decidedly entertaining"—but merely remarks that they will be vaunted as such by the poetess's "admirers," for whom, he adds, "perhaps" the letters might "supply in some degree a sensible want." There is a subtle, wry note to the novelist's tone here, best evident in the extreme, almost parodic language in which he conveys the fervor of EBB's admirers, their hunger for something—anything—more "from her hand," which, of course, will write no more verse. There is an almost histrionic quality to the way James portrays their lamentable situation: "*nothing* in the way of a memoir . . . had hitherto been published"; "*no* other letters had . . . *ever* been given to the world"—at least not "to our knowledge." In thus invoking the limits of human knowledge, James calls into question the premise that such letters have *bona fide* "biographical value; that is, he suggests they might "supply a sensible want" less in the sense of filling in a gap (a reasonable lack of information), as that in that of satisfying a desire (a passionate yearning for information). Sensibility, in other words, is ambiguous as used here, poised between rationality and its opposite, and as a result James's own position on the issue of the "biographical value" of personal letters is impossible to pinpoint. His sudden shift to envisioning the reaction of "Mrs. Browning's colder critics," who, he suggests, will read the correspondence with "hardly less pleasure," underscores what might well be his own ambivalence on the matter. If James's lightly satiric

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<sup>42</sup> HJ, review of *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, addressed to R. H. Horne*, ed. S. R. Townshend Mayer, *Nation* (15 February 1877), repr. in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, 776. All subsequent quotations are on this page.

depiction of EBB's devoted fans seems to suggest their wish for additional material about the poetess's life—their belief that biographical information will allow them to know her mind and better understand her work—is somewhat ludicrous, then his assertion that “Mrs. Browning's colder critics” will read the same letters with “hardly less pleasure” intimates that prurient curiosity more than a noble wish to advance scholarship is the impetus behind reading a writer's letters.



## CHAPTER 2

### Browning's "My Last Duchess" and James's Earliest Tales

The poem now known as "My Last Duchess" first appeared in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, though it was not until its 1849 republication in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* that it came to bear this title. Browning also added the subheading "Ferrara" to the later edition. This addition identified the poem's speaker as a historical personage, the sixteenth-century Italian aristocrat and member of the powerful Este dynasty, Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, now remembered chiefly as the tormentor of the poet Torquato Tasso. Jacob Korg writes:

The marriage between Browning's Duke and his ill-fated Duchess corresponds closely with that between Alfonso and Lucrezia, the daughter of the Duke Cosimo de' Medici of Florence[,] in 1558. . . . The marriage was a political one, the bride being fourteen, the groom, who was heir to the Dukedom at the time, twenty-five. Alfonso left for France three days after the wedding, did not return to Ferrara until after his father's death the following year, and did not send for his bride until three months after that. She entered the city accompanied by a gorgeous procession; less than a year and a half later she died, probably from natural causes (50-51).

The poem's meaning hinges on our recognition of the discontinuity between the Duke's public and private selves.<sup>1</sup> As readers, we must come to realize that the Duke is a power-obsessed despot who, suspecting his late wife of having been unfaithful (or, at least, not sufficiently grateful), arranged for her murder and now, as the poem draws to a close, is making arrangements to replace her with the "fair daughter" of a wealthy count. We understand his pathology, his penchant for serial matrimony, by discerning that his words

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Korg, *Browning and Italy* (Athens: Univ. of Ohio Press, 1983), 50-51.

do not exactly mean what they say. Amazingly, we understand this even though the Duke, as monologist, has near-total control of the information he reveals and steadfastly refrains from self-disclosure. Herbert Tucker thus attributes the “definitive modernity” of Browning’s monologues to the way in which “what . . . speakers say gains ascendancy over what they set out to mean.”<sup>2</sup> But how does this work exactly? How do we come to know what the Duke refuses to tell us? How is it possible that the sum total of the dramatic monologue, its aggregate meaning, is greater than that of the individual words that constitute it?

In order to begin answering these questions, it is useful, first of all, to consider how the dramatic monologue has been theorized. The standard definition holds that it is a kind of hybrid genre that combines “an emotional expressiveness from lyrics, a speaker who is not the poet from drama, and elements of mimetic detail and retrospective structuring from narrative.”<sup>3</sup> Scholars are generally in agreement on these points but nevertheless have struggled to augment this capacious definition with a more nuanced taxonomy. A few critical efforts to distill what it is that is unique about the dramatic monologue are especially relevant to my discussion here.

In the full-length study *Browning’s Experiments with Genre*, Donald Hair conventionally defines the dramatic monologue as “a combination of the drama and the lyric,” but immediately seems to recognize the definition’s insufficiency, adding that

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, Jr., “From Monomania to Monologue: ‘St. Simeon Stylites’ and the Rise of the Victorian Dramatic Monologue,” *Victorian Poetry* 22 (1984): 121-27. “The business of articulation, of putting oneself into words, compromises the self it would justify; it disintegrates the implicit claim of self-presence in the lyric into a rhetorical fabric of self-presentation,” Tucker writes (125). Tucker makes explicit reference to “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation,” but account of the “generic conversion of a sovereign confidence”—what we might think of as lyric perversion (he himself describes it as “what befalls the lyric voice”) clearly pertains to “My Last Duchess” as well (125).

<sup>3</sup> E. Warwick Slinn, “Dramatic Monologue,” in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 80.

“Browning found the combination a flexible one” and that “his treatment of it varies widely.”<sup>4</sup> Robert Langbaum provides a more nuanced account in *The Poetry of Experience*, which remains one of the dramatic monologue’s critical touchstones. Langbaum, noting that the dramatic monologue depends on “the reader’s relation to it,” argues that a tension between, on the one hand, judgment of the speaker, and, on the other, sympathy with him, not only structures the dramatic monologue but also differentiates it from other genres. According to Langbaum, “[W]e understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue by sympathizing with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

Building on Langbaum’s work, Ralph Rader argues that the dramatic lyric and the dramatic monologue are differentiable on the basis of “the very different relations between poet, speaker, and reader” that emerge from their respective uses of the first-person “I.” Accordingly, he reframes the distinction in terms of vantage (or reference) such that it becomes a question of perception, of the inside/outside binary. In the dramatic lyric, he writes, “we [as readers of the poem] are imaginatively conflated with the speaker, understanding him *from the inside out*, seeing with his eyes and speaking with his voice as if on our own behalf”; conversely, in the dramatic monologue, “as an inescapable condition of rendering the text intelligible, the reader must imagine the speaker as an outward presence, as we in our bodies register others in their bodies, *from the outside in*.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Hair, *Browning’s Experiments with Genre* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), 100.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (1957; repr., Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph W. Rader, “Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic ‘I’ Poems and Their Theoretical Implications,” in *Critical Essays on Robert Browning*, ed. Mary Ellis Gibson (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), 37, emphasis added.

Furthermore, as Slinn observes, even while the dramatic monologue “exploits the emphasis in lyrical writing upon a speaker’s internalized and isolated subjectivity, it [also] disrupts that isolation by placing the speaker in a relationship to an auditor.”<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Slinn holds that the dramatic monologue is “inherently intersubjective”; in other words, one that traffics in the dynamic—and, significantly, *extra*-linguistic—interactions between individual subjectivities.<sup>8</sup> (Slinn’s invocation of intersubjectivity refers to that between the Duke and the envoy within the poem, though as we’ll see the concept is also applicable to author and reader.)

Browning’s own account of his dramatic method in a letter to John Ruskin points to the vital importance of the extra-linguistic to the dramatic monologue. He writes:

I *know* that I don’t make out my conception by language. . . . You would have me paint it all plain out, which can’t be; but by various artifices I try to make shift with touches and bits of outlines which *succeed* if they bear the conception from me to you.<sup>9</sup>

Browning’s description of his method is reminiscent of Isobel Armstrong’s account of the Victorian “double poem,” in which “quite literally two concurrent poems” are contained in “the same words.” After noting that “Schopenhauer wrote of the lyric poet as uttering between two poles of feeling, between the pure undivided condition of unified selfhood and the needy, fracturing self-awareness of the interrogating consciousness,” Armstrong goes on argue that Victorian poetry does not maintain this dichotomy. She writes:

The Victorian poet does not swing between these two forms of utterance but dramatizes and objectifies their simultaneous existence. There is a kind of duplicity involved here, for the poet often invites the simple reading by presenting a poem as lyric expression as the perceiving subject speaks . . . But in a feat of

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<sup>7</sup> Slinn, “Dramatic Monologue,” 81.

<sup>8</sup> Slinn, “Dramatic Monologue,” 81.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Browning to John Ruskin, 10 December 1855, quoted in *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), 15.

recomposition and externalization the poem turns its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the *subject's* utterance but the *object* of analysis and critique.<sup>10</sup>

What is particularly remarkable about Browning's dramatic monologues is that their meaning cannot be said to inhere fully in what is stated or written; it can't be determined solely on the basis of what lies within the text itself, nor can it be said to result from what is *not* articulated or registered on the page, however evocative or incriminating such omissions might be. Instead, meaning is a function of the relationship between the two: we arrive at it by extrapolating from what is made explicit so as to explain the suggestive aporeia of all that is not. In other words, meaning depends on our ability to grasp that the speaker's words mean far more than what they literally convey, and, miraculously, on our discerning with a high degree of specificity the nature of what exactly that *more* is. I want to suggest that we do this through an automatic process of interpretive mediation between the subjectivity that is presenting itself to us in words as the poem unfolds—that is, the subjectivity of the monologist—and the various other minds being described, addressed, or evoked in the process. I call this kind of mediation *reading intersubjectively*.

Let's look at the opening of "My Last Duchess" to get a sense of how this works:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 12.

The poem opens obliquely, in a way that immediately forces the reader into reconstructive mode. “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,” Ferrara remarks. If the possessive pronoun “my” seems unusual in its application to “Duchess,” a noun that—unlike, for instance, *wife*—does not designate an exclusive, dyadic relationship to another person, this strangeness is compounded by the adjective “last,” also atypical in its usage as a modifier for “Duchess.” Contrasted with *my last day* or *my last dollar*, the strange phrase “my last Duchess” beguiles, making us wonder why the speaker refers to her as such, particularly if in fact she is his wife. The realization that he’s commenting on a portrait adds to the complexity and perplexity of the statement. Recognizing that the poem is to some extent an ekphrastic one, we then find ourselves confronted with a split subject: the Duke’s insistence on the portrait being a lifelike rendering would seem to imply the existence of a real-life counterpart to the painted Duchess. Particularly unsettling here is the way his initial emphasis on the duchess herself—“That’s my last duchess”—casually and ominously perverts the conventional language used in discussions of portraiture: the painted version is described as a lifelike reproduction, but in a way that evokes death.

The Duke’s initial failure to distinguish between the portrait and the woman means that it is up to us as readers to make that distinction ourselves—and, just as importantly, to recognize the significance of its absence from his monologue. The problem we come up against in trying to comprehend the epithet—applied to either the painted likeness *or* to her flesh and blood counterpart—results from the impossibility of determining in which of two mutually exclusive senses the adjective “last” is being used:

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Browning, “My Last Duchess,” in *Robert Browning’s Poetry*, ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer (New York: Norton, 2007), lines 1-13. Hereafter quoted parenthetically by line number.

the singularity and finality of the superlative (once there was a Duchess; there will never be another) cannot be reconciled with the multiplicity and continuity of the relative (which suggest this Duchess was the latest in a series). Thus we begin to wonder if the “last Duchess” might not be the *late* Duchess as well, a disturbing prospect. In this vein, the comparative (“Looking *as if* she were alive”) and the hypothetical it contains (“*if* she were alive”) reinforce the subjunctive verb’s function as a means of expressing unreality. By the logic governing such expressions, then, we must understand everything following the “if” as untrue, and thus we find ourselves taken aback by the specter of the dead Duchess. We might attempt to take solace in the notion that the reference is figurative—after all, the conditional expression of the simile does call for the past tense—but any reassurance we might find in the fact that the Duke is describing a portrait, the form of painting most frequently associated with realism, is short-lived. Somehow—and though, in the Duke’s own words from later in the poem, we “know not how,” nevertheless we do *know*—all is not right.

So how, then, *do* we know? How do readers collectively arrive at roughly the same understanding of the poem’s latent content (the duchess’s murder), particularly given that the Duke’s monologue proceeds by speculation and manipulation? Never does he present information directly; his narrative unfolds by circumlocution, by envisioning possible scenarios, by describing not what happened but what *seemed* to him to be likely to happen, as most notably happens when he describes how viewers of the portrait invariably “seemed as they would ask [him], if they durst, / How such a glance came there.” Here the Duke tellingly privileges his own perspective, revealing that within the economy of the monologue—that is, within his dominion—potentiality trumps actuality

and in a sense even works to determine the outcome. What the Duke thinks is—or *was*—likely to happen becomes what happened.

Crucial to our recognizing his unreliability is that he does this even for moments in the past, with respect to incidents whose actual known outcome would be far more germane to report. The most notable example of this occurs when, after identifying the name of the artist who painted the portrait, Ferrara unnecessarily explains that he “said / Frà Pandolf by design” and then gives an elaborate justification for this, apparently in an attempt to preempt any questions from his listener. In the Duke’s insistence that “none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I,” we discern evidence of his deep-seated need to be in control of interpersonal situations. The image of the drawn curtain—ostensibly a literal reference to the uncovering of the portrait on the wall—is revealing insofar as it suggests that the maintenance of such control involves a measure of theatricality. Within the monologue, his verbal manipulation works to guarantee that his own subjective conjectures (what *seems* to him as if it were about to happen) are transformed, in his mind at least, into objective facts.

Most significant for our purposes is the fact that he does so even—especially—when it comes to the minds of others. Although the Duke tells the listener, the envoy who has come to transact his remarriage, that he is “not the first” to inquire about who painted the portrait, it is clear from the Duke’s justification of his name-dropping that the auditor never actually had the chance to pose the question in the first place. As Slinn puts it, the Duke is so entranced by his performance of power that “he even assigns his own thoughts to other people” and, still more egomaniacal, presumes that they “think what he imposes



on them.”<sup>12</sup> The result is a “formidable solipsism” with strong deterministic implications: since Ferrara’s “conscious mind acknowledges no other self, in himself or in others, . . . he *is* the constructed persona, his own mask.”<sup>13</sup> (Recall Browning’s social persona and James’s intense fascination with what might lie under that mask.)

Such dubious conjectures regarding the contents of other minds are essential to Browning’s dramatic monologues, and I want to suggest that this is because they are key to understanding the latent content of the poem—what lies, as it were, behind the curtain or, if you prefer, beneath the mask—as well. Despite—or, more accurately, because of—their presentation, in “My Last Duchess,” as resolutely firm convictions, such conjectures work to reveal the speaker’s deluded mental state. Another way to say this is that our recognition, as readers, first that the monologist’s sense of what others are likely to think and feel is misguided, and, second, that this sense is based on an extreme, narcissistic version of the argument from analogy—one philosophical solution to the problem of other minds—urges us to take the information the speaker tells us with a grain of salt. To put the matter slightly differently, the Duke’s account of other minds functions to signal that much of his monologue has a status akin to fictional discourse even within the fictional world of the text. (Or, perhaps, “not-quite-the-whole-truth” discourse, something that indicates a significant disjunction between the limited amount of information that we are told and the meaning that we are encouraged to deduce from it.)

In effect, we become tasked with psychoanalyzing the Duke through his monologue. The psychological—which is to say, in this case, pathological—profile that

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<sup>12</sup> E. Warwick Slinn, *Browning and the Fictions of Identity* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1982), 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> Slinn, *Fictions of Identity*, 41. Slinn writes that the Duke “recovers his social persona through an act of self-dramatising which absorbs other people’s actions into his own explanatory narrative,” a fiction that “is supported by a rationalized disbelief in the value of any other perspective” (41).

emerges results not from any one particular thing he says, suggestive though these might be, but rather from the relation his individual phrases and images bear to one another. For instance, his statement that the envoy is “not the first” (12) to inquire about the portrait in and of itself reveals a concern with establishing primacy that becomes more meaningful by virtue of its proximity to his assertion, in the very next line, that “ ’t was not / Her husband’s presence only” that “called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess’s cheek” (13-14). The closeness of the two statements about what is “not,” which comes into sharp relief through the repetition of the word, compounds the import of either phrase alone. We recognize that the Duke’s concern with primacy (and, it seems likely, virginity) is linked to anxieties about chastity and infidelity: he fears not being the sole person to give the Duchess pleasure; without this assurance, he doubts his own supremacy at the center of her world. As he goes on to tell us:

My favour at her breast,  
 The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
 The bough of cherries some officious fool  
 Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
 She rode with round the terrace—all and each,  
 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
 Or blush, at least. (25-31)

Here, too, the images in the series become additionally significant as they compound one another. The sexual undertone of “favour at her breast,” a phrase that might be innocent enough if used on its own, is perverted by the mention of night in the next line (“dropping of the daylight in the West”) and further enhanced by the sexually symbolic “bough of cherries—notably “broke[n]” and bestowed upon the Duchess by another man. The fact that the Duchess is depicted astride a mule contributes to this sense, as does the fact that she rides in the orchard, a locale that connotes Eden and hence the Fall.

What the Duke objects to turns out to be his late wife's mode of relationality, the fluidity with which she shifted her focus from one object to the next: from her husband, to the setting sun, to the cherry bough. As the Duke sees it, "she liked whatever / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (23-24). He takes offense at what he perceives to be the equivalencies of her regard. Her gaze, in his eyes at least, is nothing short of promiscuous, and he experiences her wandering attention as degrading to himself and his masculine ego. Ironically—and revealingly—the Duke objects to what he perceives as the Duchess's failure to discriminate among the various sources of her pleasure, but it is he himself who fails to make such distinctions, as evidenced by his conflation of her "approving speech" with her "blush." Here, verbal approbation is made equivalent to an involuntary bodily reaction that, in turn, alerts us to the Duke's fear of being cuckolded, and we come to understand that he has responded to this fear by having her put to death so that she can neither speak nor blush any longer. He tells the envoy, "I gave commands, / Then all smiles stopped together" (46). The plural "smiles," combined with the strange use of "together"—he does not say, for instance, "her smiles stopped *altogether*," though this is implied—convey the sense that Duke's "commands" have "stopped" more than one smile and, perhaps, ended what he believed to be an adulterous liaison. His need to subordinate the Duchess to his will by eradicating her vitality is reinforced by the note on which the poem closes, with the Duke enjoining the envoy to "Notice Neptune . . . / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" (54-56).

The Duke obviously identifies with Neptune and views himself as a godlike figure taming the rare sea-horse that is the Duchess. With the addition of yet another item to his

collection and his emphasis that the statue was cast expressly for him, the Duke brings his own narcissism even more sharply into focus. Presumably, he wouldn't want our focus to be anywhere else; the last word in the monologue is his triumphant self-assertion ("me!"). The poem concludes on this note of immobility. This stasis—the taming of the sea-horse, the cast bronze of the statue—is especially disturbing since the Duke has announced his intention to take another wife and phrased it in terms of material gain. The Duke assures the envoy that it is not "The count your master's known munificence" (49) he desires, but rather "his fair daughter's self" (52), which he immediately proclaims to be "my object" (53). Again, the significance of this declaration, with its unsettling reduction of individual subjectivity to the status of a mere "object," is enhanced by its position directly following Ferrara's reference to the dead Duchess's painted image and right before his mention of the Neptune statue. The Duke's objective is make subjects into objects.

The Duke's anxiety about the Duchess and other men demonstrate an awareness of other minds beyond his own, other agents whose whims and wills he does not control. Yet what Browning's monologue most forcefully brings to light is that the consciousness that others are thinking is quite separate from an understanding of what they might be thinking. The Duke, as we have seen, projects his view onto others but seems incapable of the reverse, namely of introjecting himself into their position and seeing the world through their eyes. His need for power and domination leads him to assume that everyone else is attempting to dominate him. Thus his attempts to imagine what others might be thinking—from viewers of the portrait to Frà Pandolf to the Duchess, the "officious fool," and, finally, the envoy—invariably devolve into a kind of solipsism that leads him to reveal more about his own mind than he perhaps intends.

The Duke's tendency to attribute his own view to others, while simultaneously performing a solicitous over-attentiveness to other minds, becomes most apparent when he describes his reaction to the Duchess's perceived promiscuity. "Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?," he asks (34-35), a rhetorical question that seems to posit universal benevolence as the only appropriate response. He continues:

Even had you skill  
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop. (35-43)

Here what begins as an ostensibly hypothetical scenario is quickly transformed into a deeply personal matter, as evidenced by the shifting referent of the second-person pronoun. In the first two uses ("had you skill / . . . to make your will"), the second-person purportedly evokes the only natural human response to the Duchess's "trifling"; in this sense, they could also be taken to refer more specifically to the envoy, in an attempt by the Duke to elicit sympathy for his plight—a rhetorical maneuver that amounts to "What would you have done in my position?" In effect, then, he is *really* talking about himself, as indicated by the parenthetical interjection he makes to insist on his lack of "skill / In speech," an outright lie. In the next two instances, which are contained in the imagined dialogue ("Just this / Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss, / Or there exceed the mark"), "you" refers to the offending party, the Duchess, who is present only in his mind. In then describing how she "set her wits to yours," he again uses the second person in reference to himself; the possessive "yours" describes his own wits, for any doubt that

he is describing his own experience disappears when he concludes the hypothetical scenario with the emphatic proclamation, “I choose / Never to stoop.”

The triple repetition of “stoop” (“Who’d stoop”; “some stooping”; I choose / Never to stoop”) indicates the Duke’s profound anxiety about abasement. It is clear that the Duke feels demeaned and humiliated by the Duchess’s behavior, by her “heart . . . too soon made glad,” her taking pleasure in anything other than him. “She thanked men . . . / . . . as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody’s gift,” he complains bitterly (31-34). Here, again, the Duke reveals a deep concern with rank and more specifically with supremacy; he wants, needs, and *demands* to be uppermost at all times. He recounts having “lessoned” the Duchess, having taught her a lesson (for having, as he puts it, “exceed[ed] the mark”), but the implication is that he has *lessened* her, diminished her by reducing her to a painted version of herself, one not capable of matching wits against him.

Indeed, we glean additional insight into the Duke’s psyche from the close attention he pays to the physical position of his auditor the envoy. As the monologue begins, he describes how the duchess is standing in the painting (“there she stands”); then, almost as if the sight of the standing Duchess is too much for his fragile ego to bear, he immediately enjoins the envoy to “sit and look at her.” Although seemingly phrased politely—“Will ’t please you sit and look at her?,” the Duke asks—his failure to use the infinitive verb (“to sit”) gives the question the feeling of an imperative, a command not unlike the one he uttered when the Duchess was executed. Notably, at the end of the poem—right after revealing that he “gave commands” such that “all smiles stopped together”—he makes recourse to the same syntactical structure. “Will ’t please you

rise?,” he says to the envoy (47). Here again the directive immediately follows his mention of the painted Duchess standing (“There she stands / As if alive”); now it is as though the verisimilitude of her likeness has so unsettled him that he cannot bear to be in the presence of the portrait any longer. He seems to need to reassert his power. “We’ll meet / The company below,” he adds, comforting himself with the knowledge of his literal position above others and at the same time setting forth a plan of action that reinforces that “rise” was in effect an order. Evidently, the envoy takes it as such and, recognizing his subordinate position, offers to let the Duke descend first. “Nay, we’ll go / Together down, sir” (53-54), Ferrara replies, for he cannot tolerate being below the envoy in a literal sense, not even momentarily.

In this vein, the declaration “I choose / Never to stoop” amounts to an articulation of his fixed perspective, his unwillingness to grapple with the problem of other minds, his inability to consider how things might look to others, and his insistence on forcing them to conform to his view. “One might argue,” Cornelia Pearsall writes, “that the enigmatic and potentially wayward nature of [the Duchess’s] subjectivity as well as her expression is part of what prompted the Duke to fix a single image of her.”<sup>14</sup>

Let us turn now to fiction in order to see how Henry James at once evokes Browning and employs similar techniques in two of his earliest published stories.

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<sup>14</sup> Cornelia D. J. Pearsall, “The Dramatic Monologue,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 79.



FIGURE 3. Illustration by Gaston Fay that accompanied the first installment of Henry James's "The Story of a Masterpiece" upon its publication in the *Galaxy* in January 1868.

"The Story of a Masterpiece" (1868), one of James's first published tales, makes explicit reference to Browning's "My Last Duchess" at the outset, appropriately using the monologue as the name of the portrait—the masterpiece of the story's title—on which its plot hinges. "I called it originally after something I'd read—Browning's poem, 'My Last Duchess,'" Stephen Baxter, the story's artist character, remarks at the outset of the tale, adding the portrait is not an attempt to render the features of any woman in particular but rather "is simply an attempt to embody my own private impression of the poem, which has always had a strong hold on my fancy."<sup>15</sup> In the painter's description of his project, James delivers a statement of purpose that is obviously self-reflexive, for "The Story of a

<sup>15</sup> HJ, "The Story of a Masterpiece," in vol. 1 of *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, 12 vol., ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1961), 259. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated "SM."



Masterpiece,” to a far greater extent than any of his other tales, makes it abundantly clear that Browning’s verse—and, in particular, the dramatic monologue “My Last Duchess”—exerted a “strong hold” on James’s own imagination. Thus, to expand on the research and arguments of Ross Posnock, in this story we find what I have identified as first of several attempts by James to adapt Browning’s methods to prose fiction, efforts which, as I show here and in the following chapter, were crucially important to the technical development of the novelist’s signature “psychological” style.<sup>16</sup> Let me repeat, here, that I am in full agreement with Sharon Cameron’s assertion that “James dissociates consciousness from psychology.”<sup>17</sup> My goal is to show how James’s representation of consciousness—in its evolution from his lesser-known early tales to the novella *The Aspern Papers* and, finally, *The Wings of the Dove*—results from his appreciation of how Browning’s intersubjective poetics cultivates meaning through the relationship between text and reader.

The narrative perspective of “The Story of a Masterpiece” is extremely strange. It is neither a stream of consciousness nor an interior monologue, despite the occasional and unmistakable interjections of an unnamed first-person narrator who plays no role in the action but nevertheless possesses an intimate knowledge of the situation at hand. In brief, that situation is as follows: A newly-engaged, middle-aged widower named John Lennox decides to commission a portrait of his beautiful young fiancée, Marian Everett, and hires the aforementioned Stephen Baxter to do the job on the basis of the “My Last Duchess” portrait, which seems to him to bear an uncanny resemblance to his beloved wife-to-be.

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<sup>16</sup> As I noted earlier, Posnock’s *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning* does not treat James’s engagement with Browning in any of fictional texts I examine here. In what appears to be either a baffling omission or a glaring oversight, he does not mention the “The Story of a Masterpiece” or “A Light Man,” both of which make explicit reference to the poet’s works. He likewise refrains from discussing *The Aspern Papers*. Nor does he explain the vital importance of “My Last Duchess” to James’s development as a fiction writer, though he does acknowledge Browning’s 1855 volume *Men and Women* as “a sacred text” of the novelist’s adolescence (190).

<sup>17</sup> Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*, 1.

(Unbeknownst to Lennox, Baxter was engaged to Marian at the time he began painting the portrait, perhaps accounting for the similarity.) A series of sittings ensue and, as the new portrait begins to emerge, Lennox grows increasingly disturbed by what he perceives as repugnant qualities in the painted likeness, which quickly extend to the woman herself. He becomes consumed with doubts about Marian's virtuous character, so much so that he questions his plans to remarry. His angst escalates and the story culminates with him seizing "a long, keen poinard" and "thrust[ing] it, with barbarous glee, straight into the lovely face of the image," first leaving "a long fissure in the living canvas," and then, "with half a dozen strokes . . . wantonly hack[ing] it across" ("SM," 295). "The act," James writes, "afforded him immense relief" ("SM," 296).

In the manuscript version, the tale ends there, giving no indication of what took place afterward. Correspondence between James and the *Galaxy*, where the story first appeared, indicates that the editors wanted the novelist to add a paragraph resolving the question of whether the marriage took place. James replied indignantly: "As for adding a paragraph I should strongly object to it. It doesn't seem to me necessary. Silence on the subject will prove to the reader, I think, that the marriage *did* come off . . . and the story closes in a more dramatic manner, to my apprehension, just as I have left it."<sup>18</sup> Note, here, James's use of the word "dramatic" as well as his desire for the tale to end in such a manner; that is, without explicit resolution and very much like a Browning monologue.

As I mentioned, Lennox chooses Baxter to paint Marian's portrait on the basis of "My Last Duchess." Lennox perceives a striking resemblance between the face of the painted Duchess and that of his betrothed. The extent to which such a likeness is actually a feature of Baxter's image versus a figment of Lennox's imagination remains, like the

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<sup>18</sup> HJ to Francis P. Church, 23 October [1867], in *HJ Letters*, 1:74.

painted Duchess's expression, quite "ambiguous" ("SM," 263). The narrator notes that Lennox is "very much in love; or at least very much off his balance," and Lennox himself admits to being infatuated with his fiancée to the point of obsession: "[W]hen I'm away from her I feel as if I were thrust out of the ranks of the living," he says, a remark that, however melodramatic, clearly resonates with the love-as-death theme of Browning's monologue ("SM," 262). As in Browning's poem, therefore, we have reason to question the lover's perception of his beloved, and here, too, we find that our questions are framed by a painted image that we cannot see—and therefore cannot judge—for ourselves. When Lennox, "wishing to measure the force of the likeness," asks his friend if the painted lady reminds him of anyone, the man offers a cryptic reply that only serves to reflect Lennox's own impression back at him: "I know . . . of whom it reminds *you*," the friend tells him, adding, when pressed, "They are both handsome, and both have auburn hair. That is all I can see'" ("SM," 266).

But is that all there is to see? It seems unlikely. For his part, Baxter, upon being shown some photographs of Marian, acknowledges the possibility of a resemblance but insists that any similarities are entirely unconscious. "My Duchess very probably bears a certain resemblance to Miss Everett, but a not exactly intentional one," he tells Lennox, noting that he had started the portrait well before he ever met Marian ("SM," 265). At this point, in a rather extraordinary coincidence, it emerges that the artist knows Miss Everett; in fact, as Baxter reports, he was working on the painting when he first became acquainted with Marian in Europe some years before—hence, perhaps, the likeness. The full story of their relationship back then is revealed only after Lennox has engaged Baxter

to paint Marian's portrait. As the two awkwardly face one another at the first sitting, the narrator interjects:

I may as well take advantage of the moment, rapidly to make plain to the reader the events to which the above conversation refers.

Miss Everett had found it expedient, all things considered, not to tell her intended husband the whole story of her acquaintance with Stephen Baxter; and when I have repaired her omissions, the reader will probably justify her discretion. ("SM," 272)

How exactly this anonymous individual has come to know what he knows—how he is able to "repair [Miss Everett's omissions]"—is never made clear. In a lengthy narrative digression, he reveals that Baxter and Marian had been secretly engaged until the artist discovered that she was cultivating the attentions of other, richer men. He then proceeds:

The reader has now an adequate conception of the feelings with which these two old friends found themselves face to face. It is needful to add, however, that the lapse of time had very much diminished the force of those feelings. A woman, it seems to me, ought to desire no easier company, none less embarrassed or embarrassing, than a disenchanted lover; premising, of course, that the process of disenchantment is thoroughly complete, and that some time has elapsed since its completion. ("SM," 279)

As I have said, "The Story of a Masterpiece" amounts to a postmodern rewriting of Browning's "My Last Duchess."<sup>19</sup> James's tale is overt about this debt, taking pains to

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<sup>19</sup> It bears remarking that "The Story of a Masterpiece," despite being one of James's most under-examined stories, offers an early—perhaps even the earliest—prototype of an interpretive dilemma to which he would return again and again over the course of his career, most famously in *Daisy Miller* (1878). Edel classifies the story as one James's many explorations of "the mystery of womankind," a theme that the biographer characterizes as a distinctly gendered form of the problem of other minds:

[James] could describe [women]; he could reproduce faithfully their conversation and their manners; he might even try to give a picture of their mind; his intelligence could grasp them—but what were they? Fine pieces of statuary, yes, he could say that and did, likening them in his early tales to Venuses and Dianas and Junos, frozen in stone. They were, when they aroused feeling, or were encountered in the flesh, creatures of mystery and consequently of danger. Unfathomable. Sometimes when they seemed to be Jezebels they turned out to be purer than the Boston snows; and sometimes a mask of purity covered women who, like Browning's "Last Duchess,"  
... liked whate'er /

She looked on, and [whose] looks went everywhere.

Fascinatingly, the matter-of-fact tone in which Edel discusses Browning's poem, here and subsequently—"Was [James's character] like the Last Duchess? Did she possess a 'certain vague moral dinginess'?"—suggest a blithe acceptance of the Duke's account of his wife's infidelity (*Life of HJ*, 1:255-56).

foreground the similarities its characters and their circumstances bear to those in the poem. As the story opens, we learn that Lennox, a childless “widower” of “large estate,” has become engaged—after a whirlwind summer’s courtship—to the “penniless” and motherless Marian Everett (“SM,” 259). Even before the reference to “My Last Duchess” a few pages later, the opening paragraph’s casual mention of Lennox’s first wife having passed away—this is among the first things we are told about him—establishes an instant parallel with the Duke of Ferrara, a connection that is underscored by their mutual wealth and which grows increasingly pronounced as the story—even its opening paragraph—progresses. Like Browning’s Duke with his “nine-hundred-years-old name” and obvious need to assert his advantages wherever possible, the anonymous narrator of James’s story is intent on establishing Lennox’s matrimonial eligibility. Thus, in addition to his “large estate,” the openings sentences of the tale describe Lennox as blessed with a “sufficiently distinguished appearance,” as well as “excellent manners,” “irreproachable habits,” “an unusual share of sound information,” and—less auspiciously and rather more ominously, especially when read in conjunction with Browning’s monologue—“a temper which was understood to have suffered a trying and salutary probation during the short-term of his wedded life” (“SM,” 259).

Several details of this opening description are worthy of attention. First, as I have already alluded to in noting that the very first thing we are told about Lennox is that he is “a widower,” the order in which the information is presented to us raises questions—even concerns—about his character that the narrator seem to be trying a bit too hard to answer or assuage. Most obviously, as in “My Last Duchess,” we are led to wonder what happened to Lennox’s late wife, who seems to have died at a fairly young age since he is

only thirty-five himself. (Like so much else, the circumstances of the first wife's passing are never explained in the tale, a fact that becomes increasingly unsettling as Lennox's remarriage approaches.) We are also encouraged to wonder when she died, particularly as the opening emphasizes quick duration, from the "short-term" of Lennox's first marriage, to the mere "six weeks" of his courtship of Miss Everett, to the fact that, as we learn in the first sentence, their engagement took place in the recent past, "[n]o longer ago than last summer ("SM," 259). Such repeated invocations of temporal brevity further encourage us to identify Lennox with Browning's Duke and to wonder what transpired in his first marriage. The peculiar evasiveness of the narrator's description of how Lennox's "temper was . . . was understood to have suffered a trying and salutary probation" during this period invites still more questions.

The description of Marian Everett, Lennox's betrothed, likewise aligns her with the "Last Duchess" of Browning's poem in ways that are overtly allusive. First of all, the "midsummer bloom upon her cheek" ("SM," 260) is reminiscent of the Duke's numerous mentions of his late wife's rosy complexion (the "spot of / Joy" in her cheek; the "faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat," and, last but not least, the "blush" that condemns her in his eyes). Similarly, and even more significantly, Miss Everett has an "*enormous*" mouth with "an immense capacity for smiles" ("SM," 260), a feature that similarly recalls the Duke's objection to the Duchess's consistent cheerfulness ("she smiled, no doubt, / Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without/ Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together"). The narrator, in describing the marital arrangement, offers details that further underscore the resonance with Browning's poem. Miss Everett, he reports, has "reason to be very thankful for Mr. Lennox's choice," for as

his wife she will enjoy “a complete stability and regularity of position” (“SM,” 261). In this vein, Marian’s father, “a decayed old gentleman,” is said to be “rubb[ing] his idle hands from morning till night over the prospect of this daughter’s marriage,” a detail that recalls the mercenary transaction at the end of “My Last Duchess” (“SM,” 261).

Reflecting Lennox’s own concerns, the story is intensely preoccupied with female chastity, what its narrator refers to early on as “the strict line of maidenly dignity”—from which, as we are assured too quickly, “Miss Everett was quite guiltless of any aberration” (“SM,” 259). Observe how, with this pronouncement of the young lady’s innocence, the narrator effectively adopts the position of judge or jury, the same role implicitly ascribed to the reader of the dramatic monologue, as we saw in the previous chapter. In this vein, among the first things the narrator tells us about Marian is that, “owing to her having no mother and no sisters, she was constrained, for decency’s sake, to spend a great deal of her time” with “certain plain cousins,” more “to her own satisfaction, it may be conjectured, than to that of these excellent young women” (“SM,” 259). Clearly, the idea is to keep “the pretty Miss Everett”—“a very marriageable young lady,” we are told repeatedly—under female supervision in order to guard against the possibility of a tainted reputation from consorting with members of the opposite sex (“SM,” 259). Miss Everett’s elders turn out to be “women of a larger experience, of a heavier caliber, as it were, and, thanks to their being married ladies, of greater freedom of action” (“SM,” 259). The tone here is layered with irony in a way that makes it difficult to know how to read Marian’s conduct. First, the narrator hints at hints of infidelity on the part of the elders, since after marriage, “greater freedom of action” is permitted. And yet it is, the narrator reports, “in her emulation of the social graces of these, her more fully licensed sisters,” that Marian

proves herself to be “guiltless” (“SM,” 259) and “irreproachable” (“SM, 260). At this point, it is not possible to interpret Marian’s conduct because we don’t know how to situate the narrator with respect to her.

It quickly becomes clear that Lennox’s ego, like that of the Duke, is unlimited in its need for external validation. We are told that he can be congratulated on his betrothal “none too often for his faith” yet “finds it difficult to wear gracefully the distinction of being engaged . . . to discharge with becoming alacrity the various *petits soins* incidental to the position” (“SM,” 261). “I’m afraid sometimes I—afraid sometimes she doesn’t really love me,” Lennox says at one point, and this detail of his stammer, the parapraxis by which he unconsciously replaces himself as the subject with Marian, is revealing in much the same way as the Duke’s pronominal ambiguities (“SM,” 262).

Unsurprisingly, “The Story of a Masterpiece” has a significant visual dimension. We are told that “Lennox saw [Marian], then loved her and offered her his hand” (“SM,” 261). He visits the studio of Baxter, who, coincidentally, happens to have been involved with Marian in the not-too-distant past. Viewing the portrait Baxter calls “My Last Duchess”—a poem with which he is evidently intimately familiar, for he tells the artist that he knows it “[p]erfectly” (“SM,” 264)—Lennox seems to detect “a hidden likeness” between the painted woman and Marian and immediately grows “anxious to know” if the resemblance is “accidental or designed” (“SM,” 263). Recall, here, both the Duke’s assertion that he “said / ‘Frà Pandolf’ by design,” and the technology of the dramatic monologue, which Browning characterized as “being, though for the most part Lyric in



expression, always Dramatic in principle . . . so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine.”<sup>20</sup>

“I take this to be a portrait . . . ‘in character’,” Lennox says. Baxter responds:

No . . . it’s a mere composition: a little from here and a little from there. The picture has been hanging about me for the last two or three years, as a sort of receptacle of waste ideas. It has been the victim of innumerable theories and experiments. But it seems to have survived them all. I suppose it possesses a certain amount of vitality. (“SM,” 263)

The violence of Baxter’s rhetoric—the portrait, and by extension the woman pictured in it, is described as a “victim” whose “vitality” has enabled her to “survive” his attempts to erase her—establishes yet another linkage to Browning’s poem, in which the portrait is a matter life and death. Baxter continues:

I am ignorant of whether it’s an attempt to embody the poet’s impression of a portrait actually existing. But why should I care? This is simply an attempt to embody my own private impression of the poem, which has always had a strong hold on my fancy. I don’t know whether it agrees with your own impression and that of most readers. But I don’t insist upon the name. The possessor of the picture is free to baptize it afresh. (“SM,” 264)

Applying Browning’s terms from the “Essay on Shelley” to the representational aesthetic under discussion here, we understand that Baxter insists on the status of the portrait as a wholly *subjective* creation. The painter is adamant that the work is merely “an attempt to embody [his] own private impression of the poem,” and he thus avers that he is not only “ignorant” as to whether Browning, in writing “My Last Duchess,” was “attempt[ing] to embody . . . a portrait actually existing,” but, furthermore, that he does not care one way

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<sup>20</sup> RB, “Preface” to *Dramatic Lyrics*, quoted in Kennedy and Hair, 85.

or another.<sup>21</sup> Nor does he seem to care whether or not his portrait “agrees with [Lennox’s] impression and that of most readers.”

Nevertheless, after learning that “My Last Duchess” was the artist’s inspiration, Lennox discerns a deeper “correspondence between the lady’s expression and that with which he had invested the heroine of Browning’s lines,” to the following effect:

The less accidental, too, seemed that element which Marian’s face and the face on the canvas possessed in common. He thought of the great poet’s noble lyric and of its exquisite significance, and of the physiognomy of the woman he loved having been chosen as the fittest exponent of that significance. (“SM,” 264)

Much hinges on the word “significance,” though precisely what it signifies for Lennox is not made explicit. Baxter, who knows Miss Everett, acknowledges the similarity but insists it is unconscious. “My Duchess very probably bears a certain resemblance to Miss Everett, but a not exactly intentional one,” he says, noting that he had started the portrait before he ever met Marian. He then adds:

You know how a painter works—how artists of all kinds work. What I found to my purpose in Miss Everett’s appearance, I didn’t hesitate to adopt . . . The Duchess was Italian, I take it; and I had made up my mind that she was to be a blonde. Now, there is a decidedly southern depth and warmth of tone in Miss Everett’s complexion, as well as that breadth and thickness of feature which is common in Italian women. You see the resemblance is much more a matter of type than of expression. Nevertheless, I’m sorry if the copy betrays the original. (“SM,” 265)

As with “significance,” much hinges on the meaning of the word “expression.” Lennox is convinced, despite Baxter’s assurances to the contrary, that “the resemblance *is*, in some

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<sup>21</sup> In his book-length study of “My Last Duchess,” R. J. Berman suggests Browning might have based the poem on a portrait of Lucrezia de’ Medici done by Agnolo Bronzino in the mid-1500s and later copied at least twice, most likely by his student Alessandro Allori; see “Appendix B,” *Browning’s Duke* (New York: Richards Rosen Press, 1972, 103-14. Interestingly, the same portrait, whose original resides in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, is central to James’s portrayal of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), and, as Miriam Allot remarks, provides “the occasion for a scene which is one of the psychological climaxes of the novel” (“The Bronzino Portrait in Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*,” *Modern Language Notes* 68 [1953]: 23). I discuss the late novel’s psychological debt to Browning and Bronzino in the Conclusion.

degree, also a matter of expression” (“SM,” 266). Lennox places crucial importance on this distinction between impression and expression, and what is at stake for him amounts to a version of what Browning posits in the “Essay on Shelley” as the essential distinction between the subjective poet and his objective counterpart. Does Baxter’s portrait merely depict his personal, subjective impression of Marian’s character—that is, is it the work of fancy?—or does it express some more impersonal, objective truth about her, perhaps some aspect of her that Lennox has overlooked?

Lennox is discomfited by thought of “Marian’s peculiar and individual charms” being discerned by another man (“SM,” 266). Baxter’s apology only serves to intensify the ambiguity: “I am sorry if the copy betrays the original,” he says. Much as there are two Duchesses in Browning’s poem, so in James’s story there are two portraits. The initial portrait—the one entitled “My Last Duchess” is described as follows:

It bore a representation of a half-length female figure, in a costume and with an expression so ambiguous that Lennox remained uncertain whether it was a portrait or a work of fancy: a fair-haired young woman, clad in a rich mediæval dress, and looking like a countess of the Renaissance. Her figure was relieved against a somber tapestry, her arms loosely folded, her head erect and her eyes on the spectator, toward whom she seemed to move—“*Dans un flot de velours traînant ses petits pieds.*” (“SM,” 263)

Later we are told that Marian “looked out of the eyes with a most penetrating tenderness and expression,” a description that calls into question Lennox’s sense of its ambiguity (“SM,” 266). Lennox and Baxter’s perceptions overlap, significantly, in their mutual sense of what both describe as Marian’s “lightness.” After terminating his engagement, Baxter consoles himself with the observation that, as he tells himself, ““She’s irreclaimably light. She’s hollow, trivial, vulgar”” (“LM,” 279). This same quality of “exquisite lightness” is what Lennox finds most objectionable in the Baxter’s wedding

portrait (“LM,” 284). “Marian’s person was lightness—her charm was lightness; could it be that her soul was levity too? Was she a creature without faith and without conscience?” he wonders (“LM,” 285). Let us turn now to another story in which James evokes Browning to see how this theme gets elaborated.

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According to Leon Edel, James’s early tale “A Light Man” (1868) “represent[s] the first instance in which he used a technical device later to be developed to perfection: the device of self-revelation by the principal character with the author never intervening to describe or elucidate [such that] the reader must figure out all the implications of the narrative himself.”<sup>22</sup> This would not have been difficult, for the title of and the epigraph to “A Light Man” would have signaled its narrator’s deception to readers familiar with Browning’s immensely successful 1855 collection *Men and Women*. James selected the following lines to introduce his tale:

And I—what I seem to my friend, you see—  
What I soon shall seem to his love, you guess.  
What I seem to myself, do you ask of me?  
No hero, I confess.<sup>23</sup>

As these lines suggest, Browning’s poem foregrounds questions of selfhood, otherness, and perception that, as we saw earlier, are central to intersubjectivity.

James’s story “A Light Man” takes the form of a collection of journal entries. The opening entry finds the diarist, a young man by the name of Maximus Austin, unhappily

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<sup>22</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 1:250.

<sup>23</sup> Browning, “A Light Woman” (1863), in vol. 5 of *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, 15 vol., ed. Ian Jack and Robert Inglesfield (Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), lines 41-44.

relegated back to his native New York after an improvident tour of Europe leaves him penniless. By his own account, he has “a net income of considerably less than nothing,” though it quickly becomes apparent that Maximus—his name is another indication of his self-interested opportunism—is rich in the ability to manipulate people and situations to his own advantage.<sup>24</sup> Thus, when a well-intentioned childhood friend by the name of Theodore Lisle obtains an invitation for Maximus to stay with his benefactor, a reclusive elderly man of large fortune, Max concocts a scheme to displace Theodore in the man’s affections and thus become sole heir to his estate. The ploy is successful to the extent that the man destroys the original will, but he dies before writing a new one. The ironic result of Max’s actions is that the money ends up being passed neither to himself nor to his generous friend Theo but instead goes to the dead man’s “nearest of kin,” “a certain Miss Meredith, a maiden lady,” as the final journal entry notes with obvious interest (“LM,” 96). The last sentence—“Yes, I shall wait for Miss Meredith”—offers a clear indication that Max, a serial predator much like Browning’s Duke of Ferrara, has found his next victim (“LM,” 96). And though precisely how he will conspire to separate this “maiden lady” from her newfound wealth is left to the reader to imagine, the very fact that he mentions her unmarried status intimates that he is not above trifling with her affections. In this, as we will see, Maximus is an early prototype of the anonymous narrator of *The Aspern Papers*, an obsessive bibliophile who is determined to obtain the love letters of a renowned poet, no matter what the cost. While Browning’s Duke may insist, in a spirit of disingenuous self-deception, that he “choose[s] / Never to stoop,” James’s villains make little effort to conceal their absence of scruples from either the reader or themselves.

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<sup>24</sup> James, “A Light Man,” in vol. 2 of *Complete Tales*, 61. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated “LM.”

In the first entry, Max, who has been back in America for a week, describes his impressions of the country takes stock of his own prospects there:

I walked today . . . along Broadway, and on the whole I don't blush for my native land. We are a capable race and a good-looking withal; and I don't see why we shouldn't prosper as well as another. . . . A capable fellow and a good-looking withal; I don't see why he shouldn't die a millionaire. At all events he must do something. When a man has, at thirty-two, a net income of considerably less than nothing, he can scarcely hope to overtake a fortune before he himself is overtaken by age and philosophy—two deplorable obstructions. I am afraid that one of them has already planted itself in my path. What am I? What do I wish? Whither do I tend? What do I believe? (“LM,” 61)

Questions of identity come to the fore immediately. “First-person narration,” as Jonathan Auerbach observes, “merges problems of identity with equally fundamental problems of knowing.”<sup>25</sup> Max describes himself in much the same way that the third-person narrator of a “The Story of a Masterpiece” described John Lennox: “I was Maximus Austin . . . endowed with a cheerful mind and a good digestion” (“LM,” 62). The disjunction between the first-person “I” and the object “Maximus Austin,” compounded by the past tense, offers readers’ an early clue that the story will hinge on a split.

The second entry records the arrival of a note from Theodore welcoming Max to New York and inviting him to spend a month with him and his “excellent host,” a “very strange old fellow” named Frederick Sloane (“LM,” 63).

Theodore’s letter is of course very kind, but it’s remarkably obscure. My mother may have had the highest regard for Mr. Sloane, but she never mentioned his name in my hearing. Who is he, what is he, and what is the nature of his relations with Theodore? (“LM,” 63)

Here Max reveals his concern with relationships. Again, Auerbach’s analysis is helpful:

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Auerbach, *The Romance of Failure: First-Person Fictions of Poe, Hawthorne, and James* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 16.

Subjectivity and social relations are absolutely interdependent, with language the defining relation between them. To determine a self means simultaneously constructing an other, since the 'I' achieves substance only insofar as it is circumscribed. Creating its own grounds of reference, the first person arrives at an identity by trying to situate itself in the world of the fiction, some otherness outside the self.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, in an indication of his extreme narcissism, Max quickly turns back to himself, concluding that he has no choice but to accept the invitation. "I shall immediately present myself. What can I do that is better? Speaking sordidly, I shall obtain food and lodging while I look about me. I shall have a base of operations" ("LM," 63). Within a matter of days, he reports having made a "'conquest' of [Mr. Sloane's] venerable heart": "I am master of the citadel," he gloats, even while confessing that he feels he "ought to shoulder [his] victorious banner and advance to more fruitful triumphs" ("LM," 72). What such "triumphs" might entail is hinted at later in the same entry when he resolves "to take a wife—a rich one, *bien entendu*" ("LM," 73).

The nonchalance with which Max shifts from the martial to the marital is yet another indication of his character. He describes his own marriageability:

I warrant myself kind. I should never beat my wife; I don't think I should even contradict her. Assume that her fortune has the proper number of zeros and that she herself is one of them, and I can even imagine her adoring me. ("LM," 74)

Much like the Duke of Ferrara's use of the possessive pronoun offered an indication of his depravity, here "my wife" indicates the hypothetical marriage is almost a *fait accompli* in Max's mind. Marriage is a major concern for Max. He repeatedly describes Sloane as being of a "feminine turn" ("LM," 75, 83) and goes on to say that his "only complaint of Mr. Sloane is that, instead of an old widower, he's not an old widow (or a

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<sup>26</sup> Auerbach, 14.

young maid), so that I might marry him, survive him, and dwell forever in this rich and mellow home. (“LM,” 74). At the same time, Max insists that he hopes to repeat Sloane’s own feat: at the age of twenty, Max writes, Sloane “married a woman of immense wealth, many years his senior,” who, not long thereafter, “very considerately took herself off and left him to the enjoyment of his freedom and riches” (“LM,” 76).

In keeping with the marital undertones, Max introduces Theodore as “the best man in the world,” a marked contrast to the account he gives of himself in the previous entry, with its insinuations of the many debaucheries—“pleasure[s] crude, brutal, and vulgar”—he committed abroad (“LM,” 62). These “stupid little sins” remain unspecified: “I was at once too bad and too good for it all,” he says (“LM,” 68). In this respect, Max instantly recognizes Sloane as an older—and luckier—version of himself. “I already feel as if I had known him a lifetime. I read him as clearly as if I had. I know the type to which he belongs,” he tells us after meeting the old man for the first time (“LM,” 75). In the tradition of the dramatic monologue, Max’s description of Sloan reveals much more about his own character: “It is clear to me that on no occasion of disinterested action can he ever have done anything. . . . He has never loved any one but himself . . . he has never known any but mercenary affection” (“LM,” 78).

Max describes Sloan as a prodigious “gossip” who does little but “read scandal, talk scandal, make scandal” (“LM,” 75). The old man, having been “a great scribbler . . . all his days,” is now at work on his memoirs, a collection of “*souvenirs intimes*” into which he “proposes to incorporate a large amount of promiscuous literary matter” (“LM,” 65). “Theodore’s principle function seems to be to get him to leave things out,” Max observes, adding:



In fact, the poor youth seems troubled in conscience. His patron's lucubrations have taken the turn of many other memoirs, and have ceased to address themselves *virginibus puerisque*. On the whole, he declares they are a very odd mixture—a medley of gold and tinsel, of bad taste and good sense. I can readily understand it. The old man bores me, puzzles me, and amuses me. ("LM," 65)

Max describes Sloane as a kind of literary relic, with skin the color and texture of "some old crumpled Oriental scroll" and a nose "like a piece of parchment stretched on ivory" ("LM," 66). As this description makes clear, Sloane is a forerunner of Juliana Bordereaux of *The Aspern Papers*, to which I will turn in the next chapter. That novella, like James's discussion of Sainte-Beuve, is deeply concerned with the issue of judgment. "A Light Man" is similar in this regard. Max refers to Theodore's "healthy impersonal judgment" ("LM," 84) and later goes on to say:

His commerce with the old man has sharpened his wits. Sloane has taught him to observe and judge, and Theodore turns round, observes, judges—him! He has become quite the critic and analyst. There is something very pleasant in the discriminations of a conscientious mind, in which criticism is tempered by an angelic charity. Only, it may easily end by getting on one's nerves ("LM," 68).

James's story is obsessively concerned with duality. "In every son of woman there are two men—the practical man and the dreamer. We live for our dreams—but, meanwhile, we live by our wits," Max says at one point ("LM," 72). Max's own duality makes him keenly perceptive when it comes to the contrarian impulses of others, Sloane in particular. And yet he seems to have great difficulty grasping the contradictory feelings aroused by relationships. Theodore's devotion to Sloane despite the old man's foibles "quite passes [his] comprehension": "It's the queerest jumble of contradictions. He penetrates him, disapproves of him—yet respects and admires him" ("LM," 80). Of Theodore himself, Max observes:

There is a decided incongruity between Theodore as a man—as Theodore, in fine—and the dear fellow as the intellectual agent, confidant, complaisant, purveyor, pander—what you will—of a battered old cynic and dilettante—a worlding if there ever was one. There seems at first sight a perfect want of agreement between his character and his function. One is gold and the other brass, or something very like it. (“LM,” 71)

Yet “on reflection,” Max concludes that “The best and purest mortals are an odd mixture, and in none of us does honesty exist on its own terms” (“LM,” 71). Theodore, he decides, must be playing a role: “it is a part; he has to simulate” (“LM,” 71).

Max becomes “puzzled” by something in “Theodore’s look and manner” and “vexed” by his “mysterious smile” (“LM,” 86-87) in a way that is reminiscent of both the Duke of “My Last Duchess” and John Lennox of “The Story of a Masterpiece.” He grows extremely frustrated when he cannot discern Theodore’s thoughts:

What business has this angel of candor to deal in signs and portents, to look unutterable things? What right has he to do so with me especially, in whom he has always professed an absolute confidence? . . . I was about to cry out, “Come, my dear fellow, this affectation of mystery has lasted quite long enough—favor me at last with the result of your cogitations!” (“LM,” 87)

Ultimately Max succeeds in replacing Theodore in Sloan’s affections, at which point it is revealed that Theodore is not as pure as Max has believed; on the contrary, the two are driven by the same mercenary motives.

Theodore’s conduct for the past ten days is suddenly illumined with a backward, lurid ray. . . . Theodore is jealous of Maximus Austin. Theodore hates the said Maximus. Theodore has been seeking . . . to see his name written . . . in a certain testamentary document: “Finally, I bequeath to my dear young friend, Theodore Lisle, in return for invaluable service and unfailing devotion, the bulk of my property, real and personal, consisting of—” . . . It is for this he has toiled, watched, and prayed . . . accommodated himself to levity, blasphemy, and insult. (“LM,” 88)

Max has misread Theodore's behavior. His arrival at this realization—a process in which his friend's behavior “is suddenly illumined with a backward, lurid ray”—is the method of dramatic monologue.

In the story's climactic scene, Max proceeds to press his advantage with Sloane, insisting that he must leave the estate for financial reasons. “I have spent my last penny; while I stay, I'm a beggar,” he pretends to confess (“LM,” 89). Hearing this, the old man becomes “inflamed” and takes out his will, promising to “burn it up” if Max will remain but falling unconscious before such action can be taken (“LM,” 89-90). Max, opening the document and finding that, indeed, it does leave everything to Theodore, barely manages to restrain an urge to toss it into the fire himself. He stands watching over the “poor, pale remnant of mortality” that is Sloan and “wondering whether those feeble life-gasps [are] numbered” (“LM,” 90). Suddenly, the old man comes to; for an instant their eyes meet, a scene that, as we will see in the next chapter, James restages in *The Aspern Papers*.

Max is unable to sleep that night. “I lay awake listening to the pendulum of my clock. It seemed to say, ‘He lives—he dies.’ I fully expected to hear it stop suddenly at *dies*. But it kept going all the morning,” he relates (“LM,” 91). Sloan summons Max and directs him to “descend into the library, open the secret door of the secretary” and retrieve the will so that it can be destroyed. There he finds the cabinet “violated” and “Theodore standing by the fireplace with a bundle of papers” (“LM,” 91). Their eyes meet. Max reports: “Somehow—I don't know how or why, or for that matter why not—I burst into a violent peal of laughter.”

Max seems to question whether he was right about Theodore's motives. “I remembered that in the hurry of my movements the other evening I had slipped the will

simply into one of the outer drawers of the cabinet, among Theodore's own papers" ("LM," 92). Theodore destroys the will. The following conversation ensues:

"Have we, then, all this while understood each other so little?" said Theodore.

"Don't say 'we' and 'each other.' I think I have understood you." ("LM," 95-96)

"I have lost a fortune, but have I irretrievably lost a friend?," Max wonders ("LM," 96).

Max responds to his own question by asserting his conviction to "wait for Miss Meredith," who is evidently Sloan's "nearest of kin" and—as he tells us unnecessarily and therefore portentously—a "maiden lady" ("LM," 96).

Edel interprets "A Light Man," which the young James wrote during a period when he remained in at home with his parents in Cambridge while his brother William traveled and studied in Europe, as one of several that explore the "theme of reversal of role and usurpation." According to this reading, a "chain of invisible brotherhood" connects Max and Theo through the elderly benefactor—who, as Edel points out, "knew in the past the father of one and the mother of the other"—and encourages us to regard it as an attempt by Henry to grapple with the issues of fraternal rivalry. "Significantly," Edel writes, "in these stories [James] seems to identify himself not with the younger or weaker individual . . . but with the older and stronger, the *usurping* individual."<sup>27</sup>

It is perhaps more accurate to say that "A Light Man," like "My Last Duchess," thematizes the serial replacement of persons. Prior to the arrival of Theodore, Max tells us early on, Sloan had "suffered dreadful mischance in three successive experiments" in employing a personal secretary ("LM," 70). Max also learns from Sloan's doctor that the

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<sup>27</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 1:250-51. Two other tales from this period that Edel places in the same category are "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" and "De Grey: A Romance." It is worth noting, however, that "A Light Man" differs from these in that it does not traffic in the supernatural.

old man “has had for the past ten years an unbroken series of favourites, *protégés*, heirs presumptive; but that each, in turn, by some fatally false movement, has spilled his pottage” (“LM,” 77). Max concludes that the aforesaid Miss Meredith must be “a discarded niece of the defunct” (“LM,” 96).

Although James was dismissive of his initial published efforts—“I value none of my early tales enough to bring them forth again,” he wrote to his mother in 1867—he made an exception for “A Light Man,” which he felt “showed a most distinct ability.”<sup>28</sup> The fact that James revised the story for inclusion in the *New York Edition* suggests its importance to his narrative project. We can see “A Light Man” as a part of a series of texts, including “The Story of a Masterpiece,” in which James implements the technique of the dramatic monologue. These tales, as Edel puts it, “offer the narrator’s self concept, and ask the reader to keep an eye on his true character,” all the while “exploiting the autobiographical form and the double personality of ‘hero and historian.’”<sup>29</sup> Let us turn now to *The Aspern Papers*, where this exploitation reaches its culmination.

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<sup>28</sup> HJ to Mrs. Henry James, Sr., 24 March 1873, in *Letters*, 1:357.

<sup>29</sup> Edel, “Introduction,” *Complete Tales*, 2:8.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Dramatic Monologue and *The Aspern Papers*

In *The Aspern Papers*, James gives perhaps the best picture ever drawn of the passionate desire to know, with its uglier aspect of exploitation, and the claims to privacy of the exploited. For no one saw more clearly than he the two sides of this dilemma—and no one except perhaps Browning was ever more torn between two cravings: for expression and for reticence.

—Maisie Ward, *Two Robert Brownings?* (1969)

There are a number of reasons why James would have had Browning on his mind as he began writing *The Aspern Papers* in early 1887. First, the novelist was spending the winter in Italy, a country that, as we saw in earlier, he had associated with Browning long before he ever met the poet in person. Additionally, he was spending most of his time in Florence, the city that had been the Brownings' residence for most of their married life and that, following Elizabeth's burial in the English cemetery there in 1861, had become inextricable with the memory of their legendary romance.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, on this particular occasion James had taken lodgings at the Villa Brichieri [fig. 4]. Located in the Tuscan hillside region known as Bellosguardo, the Villa Brichieri was famous for having been home to the Brownings' closest friend, Isabella Blagden. During her tenancy from 1856 to 1861, the villa was the "center of the social life of the English and American colony in

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<sup>1</sup> Writing to Alice from Florence in 1869, for instance, James describes having taken "a long long walk . . . out to Fiesole—'my Fiesole'—Mrs. Browning's of course, that is," he hastily clarifies, acknowledging both EBB's final resting place and her tireless advocacy on behalf of Italian Independence. HJ to Alice James, 6? October 1869, in *Letters*, 1:149. The question mark in the date is James's own.

Florence.”<sup>2</sup> Naturally, the Brownings had been crucial members of this coterie, making the trip from their downtown apartment, Casa Guidi, to Isa’s bustling salon on a weekly basis. Robert went even more frequently: during the last years that the couple lived in Florence, he evidently could be found there at least “four nights a week,” prompting references to the place as his “second home.”<sup>3</sup> It was to the Villa Brichieri that Browning



FIGURE 4. The Villa Brichieri on Bellosguardo, outside Florence, Italy. The Brownings were frequent visitors here when it was the home of their close friend Isabella Blagden. Henry James stayed at the villa while writing *The Aspern Papers* in 1887. Image from “Americans in Florence,” <http://demo.netribe.it/americani/index.en.html>

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<sup>2</sup> William O. Raymond, ““Our Lady of Bellosguardo’: A Pastel Portrait,” in *The Infinite Moment and Other Essays in Robert Browning* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1950), 52. Isabella Blagden lived in Florence off and on from 1849 until her death in 1873, though she vacated the villa shortly after EBB’s passing.

<sup>3</sup> Edward C. McCleer, “Introduction” to *Dearest Isa*, xx.

dispatched the couple's son, Pen, during Elizabeth's final illness, and it was to the Villa Brichieri that he himself retreated for several weeks after her death.

James had visited Isa Blagden's salon on his first trip to Italy in 1869, though by that time, of course, the Brownings were no longer fixtures there. When he returned as a long-term guest in December of 1886, the villa was being leased by his friend Constance Fenimore Woolson, an American expatriate, popular novelist, and deaf spinster.<sup>4</sup> James recorded the idea for the *The Aspern Papers* in an entry in his notebook dated 12 January 1887. That afternoon he had paid a visit to the Florentine salon of another fellow novelist, Violet Paget (who published under the pseudonym Vernon Lee). Paget's brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, had told him of the "curious adventure" of one Captain Edward Silsbee, a "Boston art-critic and Shelley-worshipper." The notebook entry reads:

Miss Claremont [Mary Jane "Claire" Clairmont], Byron's *ci-devant* mistress (the mother of Allegra) was living, until lately, here in Florence, at a great age, 80 or thereabouts, and with her lived her niece, a younger Miss Claremont—of about 50. Silsbee

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<sup>4</sup> Constance Fenimore Woolson was the niece of the American novelist James Fenimore Cooper. By most accounts, James's unconventional intimate friendship with "Fenimore," as he called her, seems to have been a relationship not unlike one he portrays between the narrator and the esteemed poet's niece in *The Aspern Papers*—platonic and obtusely self-serving on his side, romantically hopeful on hers. Edel, based on four surviving letters that Woolson wrote to James, suggests: "Henry had allowed his own needs for friendship, companionship, understanding, to blind him to what he might stand for in his relationship with Fenimore, and what he might be doing to her affections" (*Life of HJ*, 3:226). Anne Boyd Rioux describes the six-week period of James and Woolson's cohabitation in 1887 as an experiment that "would determine once and for all the nature of their relationship. Were they companions, bachelor and spinster, who could conceivably take the next step toward romance? Or were they writers, that breed apart, who could live outside of the conventional arrangements between men and women?" (*Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist* [New York: Norton, 2016] 213). In any case, the 'experiment' seems not to have ended well: the writers parted ways after the summer and Woolson died several years later, apparently by her own hand. Upon learning of her death, James immediately made the long journey from London to Venice, where he spent some six weeks helping Woolson's relatives sort through her personal effects; the trip most likely was motivated in some degree by a desire to recoup the letters he had sent to her over the years. According to a manuscript of reminiscences deposited in the Bodleian Library at Oxford by their mutual friend Zina Hulton, James then "decided to destroy all [that remained of Woolson's papers] by drowning them in the lagoon. So he went far out in a gondola and committed them to the water where it was really deep" (quoted in Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, "Introduction" to *Letters from the Palazzo Barbaro*, ed. Zorzi [London: Pushkin Press, 1998], 31). As Rioux notes, a legend persists that James also submerged Woolson's dresses, and that the garments "rose up like black balloons all around him and would not go down without a struggle" (313).



knew that they had interesting papers—letters of Shelley’s and Byron’s—he had known it for a long time and cherished the idea of getting hold of them. To this end he laid the pain of going to lodge with the Misses Claremont—hoping that the old lady in view of her great age and failing condition would die while he was there, so that he might then put his hand upon the documents, which she hugged close in life. He carried out this scheme—and things *se passèrent* as he had expected. The old woman *did* die—and then he approached the younger one—the old maid of 50—on the subject of his desires. Her answer was—“I will give you all the letters if you marry me!” . . . Silsbee *court encore*.<sup>5</sup>

It was the presence of the Countess Gamba, “niece by her husband of Byron’s Guiccioli,” that prompted the relaying of the Silsbee anecdote, according to one of James’s letters of this period: “she has a lot of his [Byron’s] letters to the G. which she declares shocking and unprintable—she took it upon herself to burn one of them up!”<sup>6</sup>

James started writing *The Aspern Papers* almost immediately upon recording the idea for it and worked on the tale intensely between March and mid-June of 1887, when he sent it—unannounced and unsolicited—to Thomas B. Aldrich at *The Atlantic*. During that time, he made two trips to Venice, where the novella is set. First, in late February, he paid a visit to the Palazzino Alvisi—also known as the “Casa Alvisi” or “Ca’ Alvisi” [fig. 5]—on the Grand Canal, the home of his fellow American expatriate Katherine de Kay Bronson, a wealthy woman living on her own (her husband had been committed to a sanitarium in Switzerland) whom he initially met in Newport and with whom he became reacquainted with during his transatlantic journeys. James commemorated both the Casa Alvisi and his decades-long friendship with its owner in an essay by the same name that

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, eds., *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 33-34.

<sup>6</sup> HJ to Grace Norton, 27 February [1887], in *HJ Letters*, 3:167.

appeared in the *Cornhill* in February 1902 as the prefatory note to a selection of Mrs. Bronson's own recollections entitled "Browning in Venice."<sup>7</sup>



FIGURE 5. Katherine Bronson's "Ca' Alvisi" (left, with verandah) and the neighboring Palazzo Giustiniani-Recanti, where both Browning and James stayed while in Venice. Photograph via Jax Stumpes travel blog, [http://stumpes1.rssing.com/chan-12711945/all\\_p3.html](http://stumpes1.rssing.com/chan-12711945/all_p3.html)

The guest accommodations where James stayed on this occasion were actually part of the neighboring Palazzo Giustiniani-Recanti, "a somewhat melancholy old section of a Giustiniani palace which [Mrs. Bronson] had annexed to her own premises mainly for the purpose of placing it, in comfortable guise, at the service of her friends," as James describes it in his essay.<sup>8</sup> Chief among these was Robert Browning. (Accounts suggest the poet had some type of romantic liaison with Mrs. Bronson; indeed, his surviving

<sup>7</sup> HJ, "Casa Alvisi," *Cornhill* (February 1902), repr. in *Italian Hours* (1909; New York: Ecco, 1987), 78. James writes: "Casa Alvisi is directly opposite the high, broad-based florid church of S[anta] Maria della Salute—so directly that from the balcony over the water-entrance your eye, crossing the canal, seems to find the key-hole of the great door right in line with it." As we will see, James's reference to the key-hole is significant, for it associates Casa Alvisi with voyeurism, a major theme in *The Aspern Papers*.

<sup>8</sup> HJ, "Casa Alvisi," 79.

letters to Katherine reiterate that she is his “more than friend.”<sup>9</sup> James was keenly aware of Mrs. Bronson’s “attachment to Robert Browning,” as he would describe it later, adding, “Nothing in all her beneficent life had probably made her happier than to have found herself able to minister, each year . . . to his pleasure and comfort.”<sup>10</sup> As he notes in a letter from this period describing his residential situation, “Browning has often staid here—by the month at a time (he is a great friend of the padrona) and written crabbed verses at the table at which I sit.”<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, another of James’s letters reveals that the poet made a brief trip to Venice while the novelist was there working on *The Aspern Papers*. “Your Florentine Mr. B[rowning] is here—for a week but is dimmed by a cold,” James wrote to Francis Boott, one of their many mutual friends.<sup>12</sup>

After six weeks in Venice, James returned to Florence and the Villa Brichieri in April, where he continued to work on *The Aspern Papers*. He then returned to Venice in late May and completed the novella while staying at another palazzo in which Browning was known to be a frequent presence, the Palazzo Barbaro [fig. 6], home to the wealthy Bostonian expats Daniel Sargeant Curtis and his wife. Ariana Curtis’s memoir links the two writers: “Many interesting people have been at the Pal[azzo] Barbaro during our time. The most so was Robert Browning who constantly dined here, during his many

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<sup>9</sup> See Michael Meredith, ed., “More Than Friend”: *The Letters of Robert Browning to Katherine de Kay Bronson* (Waco: The Armstrong Library of Baylor University; Winfield: Wedgestone Press, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> HJ, “Casa Alvisi,” 79.

<sup>11</sup> HJ to Grace Norton, 27 February [1887], in *Letters of HJ*, 3:167. Near the end of his life, Browning also visited Katharine Bronson at her other residence, Casa La Mura, in nearby the nearby village of Asolo; his final published volume, *Asolando* (1889), is dedicated to her.

<sup>12</sup> HJ to Francis Boott, 15 March [1887], in *HJ Letters*, 3:176. James’s letter concludes with a self-reflexive postscript that connects it to the dramatic monologue and hence to Browning: “I think I can never have written ‘very pleased’ except dramatically—in the mouth of someone speaking—*è vero*? It is, however, very possible that I may have written *in propria persona*.”

visits to Venice . . . Then a frequent guest was . . . dear Henry James—who often stayed with us.”<sup>13</sup>



FIGURE 6. The Palazzo Barbaro on the Grand Canal in Venice, Italy. James completed *The Aspern Papers* while staying here in 1887. Photograph by Didier Descouens, Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo\\_Barbaro\\_a\\_San\\_Vidal.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo_Barbaro_a_San_Vidal.jpg)

But it was another, less glamorous, less meticulously well-restored palazzo that James used as the setting for *The Aspern Papers*, the Palazzo Capello in the Rio Marin [fig. 7]. In a 1906 letter to Alvin Langdon Coburn, the young American photographer tasked with providing images for the New York Edition, James identified the this as “the old house [he] had more or less in mind” for Juliana and Tina Bordereau:

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<sup>13</sup> Ariana Curtis, “Notes,” in *Letters from the Palazzo Barbaro*, 205.



It is the old faded pink-faced, battered-looking and quite homely and plain (as things go in Venice) old Palazzino on the right of the small Canal . . . as you enter it by the end of the Canal towards the Station. It has a garden behind it . . . and some bit of a garden-wall beside it; it doesn't moreover bathe its steps . . . directly in the Canal, but has a small paved Riva or footway in front of it, and *then* water-steps down from this little quay.



FIGURE 7. A recent photograph of the Palazzo Capello in the Rio Marin, showing the garden. By Paolo Steffan, Wikimedia Commons, [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palazzo\\_Soranzo\\_Cappello](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palazzo_Soranzo_Cappello)

James was adamant about the perspective he wanted for the novella's frontispiece:

What figures most [in the story] is the big old Sala, the large central hall on the principal floor of the house . . . from which . . . the large, rather bare Venetian perspective . . . , and preferably looking toward the garden-end, I very much hope some result. . . . [I]t seems to me it ought to give something.

The letter ends by enjoining Coburn to “get the Sala at Ca’ Capello, without fail, if *it* proves at all manageable or effective.”<sup>14</sup> Evidently, this proved impossible, however, for the frontispiece photo shows the entrance to caption tells us is “Juliana’s Court” [fig. 8].

<sup>14</sup> HJ to Alvin Langdon Coburn, 6 December 1906, in *HJ Letters*, 4:427.

Nineteenth-century Venice witnessed historical ransacking on a massive scale, as Rosella Mamoli Zorzi observes:



FIGURE 8. The photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn that served as the frontispiece to the New York Edition of *The Aspern Papers* (1908).

[M]any palaces . . . were sold after the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797 and . . . fell into the greedy hands of speculators, who did not hesitate to sell off and disperse the memories of centuries of history, the family archives, paintings, art objects, antique furnishings. The very walls of these palaces were plundered: the *stucco* work was chiselled off, the frescoes were torn down, the inlaid wooden doors were lifted off their iron

hinges; whole buildings were razed and the bricks and sconces  
were used as building materials.<sup>15</sup>

James describes the situation in a letter composed at the Casa Alvisi during the same period in which he conceived the novella. “[O]ne’s stomach is really turned here by the accounts of the hideous things that are being wrought upon the seven hills,” he remarks. “Destruction and vulgarization everywhere—.”<sup>16</sup> *The Aspern Papers* explicitly takes up this theme of ransacking the past. It is the story of the monomaniacal quest of a literary historian hell-bent on obtaining the love letters of a renowned poet named Jeffrey Aspern, a character whose womanizing past and early death have brought comparisons to Byron and Shelley, but who also has significant links to Browning.<sup>17</sup> Like Aspern, Browning, at the time James was writing the novella, was most famous for a series of love lyrics—in this case poems composed not by himself but by his wife. “With the publication of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in 1850,” biographer Pamela Neville-Sington observes, “the Brownings’ life together had entered the realm of popular folklore.”<sup>18</sup>

For the narrator, the papers—which, like Mr. Sloan’s will in “A Light Man,” are burned at the tale’s conclusion, a trope James used not infrequently—represent a material

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<sup>15</sup> Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, “Introduction” to HJ, *Letters from the Palazzo Barbaro*, ed. Zorzi (London: Pushkin Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>16</sup> HJ to Sarah Butler Wister, 27 February [1887], in *HJ Letters*, 3:169.

<sup>17</sup> *The Aspern Papers* first appeared in serial installments in *The Atlantic Monthly*, where it ran from March through May of 1888. Incidentally, in early 1888 the Shelley Society commissioned a reprint of the “Essay on Shelley,” Browning’s sole foray into critical prose, of which five hundred copies were issued at the end of February, just as *The Aspern Papers* was making its debut. Given the limited distribution of the first edition of the “Essay” in 1852—the volume was pulled from shelves almost at once—and the significantly greater renown the poet enjoyed in 1888, most of Browning’s contemporary readers probably first encountered the piece in this context; that is, over thirty-five years after its composition, at a time when James’s novella was drawing renewed attention not only to Shelley but also to the lengths to which an individual might go in the name of literary history. For the second edition, see RB, *An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley: Being a Reprint of the Introductory Essay prefixed to the Volume of [25 Spurious] Letters of Shelley published by Edward Moxon in 1852*, ed. W. Tyas Harden (London: Reeves and Turner for the Shelley Society, 1888).

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning: A Life After Death* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), 46. Neville-Sington’s biography of the latter half of the poet’s life, which she describes as “tak[ing] [its] cue from Henry James” (3), explores how the “myth of [the Brownings’] marriage” cast a kind of pall over the remainder of his days (46). As I discuss in the Conclusion, Browning felt the burden of EBB’s legacy.

connection to the dead poet he worships as a kind of personal god. The narrator makes no effort to conceal his reverence for Aspern. As he explains:

One doesn't defend one's god; one's god is in himself a defense. Besides, today, after his long comparative obscurity, he hangs high in the heaven of our literature for all the world to see; he's part of the light by which we walk. (*AP*, 46)

The narrator's figuration of Aspern as a luminous heavenly body—"a part of the light by which we walk"—offers another connection between the fictional poet and Shelley, who was known as the Sun-Treader, *and*, more importantly, to Browning, who actually coined the epithet in his 1833 work *Pauline*.<sup>19</sup>

The narrator longs for any kind of "transmitted contact" with Aspern—"to look into a single pair of eyes into which his had looked or to feel . . . any aged hand that his had touched" (*AP*, 48)—and thus he views the "sacred relics" (*AP*, 73) as a way to make his own life "continuous with the illustrious life they had touched at the other end" (*AP*, 74). In this respect, the narrator is like the star-struck speaker in the opening stanzas of Browning's "Memorabilia," who, as Britta Martens remarks in her reading of the poem, "expects a sort of epiphany through his indirect contact with Shelley the man."<sup>20</sup>

Certainly, the narrator would concur wholeheartedly with Browning's declaration, in reference to the so-called subjective poet in the "Essay on Shelley," that, "in our approach to the poetry, we necessarily approach the personality of the poet. . . . Both for love's and for understanding's sake we desire to know him, and as readers of his poetry

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<sup>19</sup> The relevant lines showcase the young Browning's own reverence for Shelley: "HIM whom all honor—whose renown springs up / Like sunlight which will visit all the world; / . . . Sun-treader—life and light be thine for ever; / Thou art gone from us—years go by—and spring / Gladdens, and the young earth is beautiful, / Yet thy songs come not—other bards arise, / But none like thee—" RB, *Pauline* (1833), in vol. 1 of *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Ian Jack and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 34, ll. 144-45, 151-55.

<sup>20</sup> Martens, 45. Recall, from Chapter 1, that the true epiphany registered by "Memorabilia," according to Martens, is Browning's own "realization that the personality of a poet is separate from his work" (45).



must be readers of his biography also” (“ES,” 426). Indeed, Browning’s stated conviction the spurious Shelley letters would, by “exhibiting the worldly relations of a poet whose genius . . . operated by a different law,” must prove invaluable for “a right understanding of [their] author’s purpose and work,” is a sentiment echoed constantly by the Aspern narrator (“ES,” 424).

The narrator devises an elaborate scheme to get access to the papers, one that hinges on his lodging with the letters’ recipient, the reclusive Juliana Bordereau, and courting her niece, Tina. The mental portrait of the narrator that quickly begins to emerge begs comparison to Browning’s Duke. Like Ferrara, the *Aspern* narrator inadvertently reveals himself to be driven by a pathological need to control and conquer. From the outset his rhetoric in describing his pursuit of the papers shows that he regards it less as a quest than a conquest: he recounts his decision to adopt a “*nom de guerre*” (*AP*, 52)—a form of “double identity”—and make his initial “advance” (*AP*, 45) upon what he calls “the citadel” (54), the ramshackle old palazzo that is home to the two women, “laying siege to it with [his] eyes” and devising his “plan of campaign” (*AP*, 46).<sup>21</sup> Like Ferrara, he lacks the self-awareness to perceive his own need for dominance and like Ferrara his controlling nature comes out on female subjects. As in Browning’s monologue, our discernment of these qualities is the first sign of the narrator’s unreliability:

I had taken Mrs Prest into my confidence; without her in truth I should have made but little advance, for the fruitful idea in the whole business dropped from her friendly lips. . . . It is not supposed easy for women to rise to the large free view of anything, anything to be done; but they sometimes throw off a bold conception—such as a man wouldn’t have risen to—with singular serenity. “Simply make them take you in on the footing of a lodger”—I don’t think that unaided I should have risen to that. I

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<sup>21</sup> Henry James, *The Aspern Papers* (1888) in *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*, ed. Anthony Curtis (New York: Penguin, 1986), 45. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *AP*.

was beating about the bush, trying to be ingenious, wondering by what combination of arts I might become an acquaintance, when she offered this happy suggestion that the way to become an acquaintance was first to become an intimate. (*AP*, 45)

“I had taken Mrs Prest into my confidence”: with this we are plunged into the narrative in a way that is tempting to describe as *in medias res*. To be sure, the abruptness of this first clause seems to put us “in the middle of things,” but this is not the case. Strangely—and unsettlingly, given the jarring immediacy, the felt urgency of the narrator’s impromptu beginning—the events being described have *already* taken place. Thus we find ourselves in a position similar to that at the start of “My Last Duchess,” the opening lines of which one critic describes as creating “the illusion of a conversation already in progress.”<sup>22</sup> This, in turn, has the effect of a divided temporality: “an immediate, ‘dramatic’ past relevant to the poem’s moment is joined by reference to a more distant, narrative past.”<sup>23</sup> Here that “more distant, narrative past,” the time of the narrator’s dealings with the Bordereau, is the chief interest of the tale. The narrator reconstructs it for us, but we must fill in the gaps in his account.

Like “My Last Duchess,” the deceptively simple opening of *The Aspern Papers* is laden with insight into psychological complexity of the speaker. He admits, first of all, that he has something to conceal, something of “confidence” he wants to keep others from knowing. Equally revealing is the syntactically unusual way this gets expressed: the narrator does *not*, for example, say “I had confided in Mrs Prest” or “I told Mrs Prest of my mission in confidence”—either of which would put him in the subject position of a confessor or supplicant, dependent upon the benevolence of the listener—but instead

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<sup>22</sup> Loy D. Martin, *Browning’s Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 97.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, 97.

makes her the object of the verb “take,” effectively rendering her one more carefully selected item for the rarified collection he possessively refers to as “my confidence.” Here we might recall Sartre’s contention, in *Being and Nothingness*, that intersubjectivity amounts to the desire to subjugate so as not to be subjugated: “I am at the very root of my being the project of assimilating and making an object of the Other.”<sup>24</sup> The narrator’s need for dominance gets expressed in the form of disdain for the minds of women, and the forcefulness intended to establish his superiority instead serves only to call attention to his insecurity. In his repetition of the verb rise (“It is not supposed easy for women to rise”; “such as a man wouldn’t have risen to”), most evident in the statement, “I don’t think that unaided I should have risen to that,” we can make out an echo of the Duke of Ferrara’s insistence that he “choose[s] / Never to stoop” as well as his injunction to the envoy, “Will ’t please you to rise?”<sup>25</sup>

Also noteworthy in the opening paragraph is the narrator’s plain admission of circumlocution (“beating about the bush”) and dishonest—or at least less-than-honest—tactics (“combination of arts”); these offer us early clues to his unreliability. So too does the relish he takes in perverting the natural order of human relations by following through on Mrs. Prest’s “happy suggestion that the way to become an acquaintance was first to become an intimate.” The narrator shows himself to have an extremely literal mindset—he describes finding it strange that Mrs. Prest refers to the niece as “the little one” when “in fact” she is “the bigger of the two in inches” (*AP*, 45)—and it is clear that for him

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<sup>24</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 474.

<sup>25</sup> As in “My Last Duchess,” in *The Aspern Papers* interpersonal power struggles are expressed through spatial positions, in particular by the staircase—by who goes up versus who stays below—and by seating arrangements. The characters themselves seem to recognize this and frequently wonder what the others are “up to” (*AP*, 84). During the narrator’s first encounter with Juliana, for instance, she says, “Please to sit down there,” and points to a chair “at a certain distance” (*AP*, 61), signifying her desire to keep the narrator where she can see him.

intimacy is “first” and foremost a matter of physical proximity. (This is underscored shortly thereafter by the poetic transformation of “intimate” into “inmate” by Mrs. Prest and then later by Tina.) The narrator regards becoming Juliana’s lodger—in effect, and in his own terms, invading her fortress—as a way of positioning himself advantageously so as to access the papers and learn the privileged, private, personal information about her romantic past he presumes they contain. He equates having knowledge of the intimate details of Juliana and Aspern’s intimate relationship with having a kind of intimacy with Juliana himself (and, through her, with Aspern). Tellingly, his version of intimacy is devoid of any interpersonal emotional connection or ethical obligation.

Interestingly, while the narrator credits Mrs. Prest with the inspired idea of his lodging under the same roof as the Bordereaux, she herself is skeptical of the tactic, as he relates: “She wished to know why even now and before taking the trouble of becoming an inmate (which might be wretchedly uncomfortable after all, even if it succeeded), I had not the resource of simply offering them a sum of money down” (*AP*, 50). It is certainly a reasonable question; after all, the narrator expends—because Juliana extorts—an exorbitant amount for the rooms he lets, a fact that he repeatedly laments and justifies only by telling himself that he will “get hold of [his] ‘spoils’ for nothing” (*AP*, 63). Why *not* simply make an offer to buy the papers outright and upfront, given that he obviously has the resources to do so?

The narrator’s indirect method of pursuing the papers has much in common with the technique of the dramatic monologue and, as we’ll see, also reflects the technique James uses in *The Aspern Papers*. The logic behind the narrator’s decision to pursue the papers in such a circuitous way is exceptionally hard to follow. He takes a number of

seemingly unnecessary steps that complicate and elongate his pursuit of the papers to a much greater degree than the situation requires. In other words, the narrator actively works to ensure that the process is mediated. Indeed, the narrator *is* a mediator: he comes to Venice as the “emissary” (*AP*, 52)—in light of his avowed plan to secure the papers through “ingratiating diplomatic arts” (*AP*, 51), we might even call him the envoy—of his colleague John Cumnor.

As his quest progresses, the narrator constantly substitutes one desired object for another. This happens even before the novella begins: what he desires most is a connection to Aspern and he originally seeks this through his research into the poet’s life. This leads him to yearn to know the intimate details of Aspern and Juliana’s relationship, which in turn leads him to want access to their letters he believes she must still have in her possession. Convinced that she will rebuff him if he so much as mentions the documents, however, he devises his scheme of dissimulation and determines that he will obtain what he wants by “mak[ing] love to the niece” (*AP*, 53). Having Tina as the object of his desire, however temporary, in turn requires that he have access to the palazzo, and therefore he needs something else: a pretext for approaching the women and insisting that he must take his lodgings in this particular dilapidated corner of Venice. To do so, he lights on their garden.<sup>26</sup>

This impulse to substitute other objects for the desired one is the mechanism by which the narrator manages conflict about his quest. In the first conversation with Tina in which Aspern’s name is mentioned explicitly, he inquires not about Juliana’s possession

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<sup>26</sup> The unconventional idea of the Venetian garden may have been inspired by Daniel Sargeant Curtis, the eminent wealthy Bostonian who, along with his wife, Ariana, had purchased the Palazzo Barbaro in 1885. Mr. and Mrs. Curtis were mutual friends of James and Browning, and both writers frequented the drawing room at the Barbaro in the late 1880s. As Zorzi explains, Daniel Curtis was an avid “gardener in a city that has little land for gardening” (“Introduction,” 15).

of the papers he so covets but rather whether she has a portrait of the poet. “They’re distressingly rare,” he explains (*AP*, 88), and refuses to drop the matter even when Tina professes not to know. “Surely you’d know, shouldn’t you, if she had one?,” he asks, and when she reiterates her ignorance he “content[s] [him]self with remarking that Miss Bordereau wouldn’t have locked up such a glorious possession as that: a thing a person would be proud of and hang up in a prominent place on the parlour-wall. Therefore of course she hadn’t any portrait” (*AP*, 88).

Juliana beats the narrator at his strategy of concealment through audacity. The narrator marvels that he and Cumnor “had not found her out sooner,” given that she “hadn’t hidden herself away in an undiscoverable hole” but rather “had boldly settled down in a city of exhibition” (*AP*, 48). Unlike the narrator, Juliana makes no effort to hide that she has something she wants to keep hidden. The narrator is forced to confront this in his first encounter with her. James’s description marks an early instance of the phenomenon of consciousness-tracking that came to be associated with modernism:

They come back to me now almost with the palpitation they caused, the successive states marking my consciousness that as the door of the room closed behind me I was really face to face with the Juliana of some of Aspern’s most exquisite and most renowned lyrics. . . . Then came a check, with the perception that we were not really face to face, inasmuch as she had over her eyes a horrible green shade which served for her almost as a mask. I believed for the instant that she had put it on expressly, so that from underneath it she might take me all in without my getting at herself. At the same time it increased a presumption of some ghastly death’s-head lurking behind it. The divine Juliana as a grinning skull—the vision hung there until it passed. (*AP*, 59-60)

Evidently the intensity of the encounter evidently leads the narrator to break into the present tense and remind us that he is describing an experience in retrospect. Like the Duke of Ferrara, the narrator objectifies Juliana; he sees her as “a relic” like the papers he

is so desperate to get hands on. James's rendering of his perception of "divine Juliana as a grinning skull" offers a disturbing evocation of a living corpse that is very Robert Browning.<sup>27</sup> In the "Essay on Shelley," as a matter of fact, right after proclaiming that "it is naturally . . . with the biography of the subjective poet that we have the deeper concern," Browning uses just such an image:

Apart from [the subjective poet's] recorded life altogether, we might fail to determine with satisfactory precision to what class his productions belong, and what amount of praise is assignable to the producer. Certainly, in the face of any conspicuous achievement of genius, philosophy, no less than sympathetic instinct, warrants our belief in a great moral purpose having mainly inspired even where it does not visibly look out of the same. Greatness in a work suggests an adequate instrumentality; and none of the lower incitements, however they may avail to initiate or even effect many considerable degrees of power, stimulating the nobler inspiration to which they are mistakenly referred, have been found able, under the ordinary conditions of humanity, to task themselves to the end of so exacting a performance as the poet's complete work. *As soon will the galvanism that provokes to violent action the muscles of a corpse, induce it to cross the chamber steadily: sooner.* ("ES," 429)

When the "Essay on Shelley" was reprinted as the first publication of the newly formed Browning Society in 1881, Frederick J. Furnivall, the society's president and volume's editor, declared its value as a statement of the poet's own views:

The interest lay in the fact, that Browning's "utterances" here are *his*, and not those of any one of the "so many imaginary persons"

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<sup>27</sup> A poem closely related to "Porphyria's Lover" is the lesser-known "Gold Hair" from Browning's *Dramatis Personae* (1862), which describes the exhumation of the grave of young girl known for her "great gold hair"; when the coffin is opened, her skull is found "wedged amid / A mint of money" (lines 37-38). Biographer Neville-Sington writes that Browning had based the poem on a legend he picked up from a guidebook to Pornic. According to her account, the legend "struck a chilling cord with the poet" in part because he was corresponding with Frederic Leighton about a sarcophagus to be placed at EBB's gravesite in the Piazzale Donatello in Florence and was nervous about the monument since "in order to put it in place, the body would have to be disturbed" (48). Neville-Sington writes: "[Browning] clearly could not shake off the macabre image of unearthing a bare skull where once there had been flesh and blood" (48). Furthermore, he "dreaded the idea of some grave-robber digging up his wife's secrets (such as her reliance on morphine) or uncovering her foibles (her passion for spiritualism, for example) just as the villagers of Pornic had exposed the young girl's miserly ways" and was therefore "determined to project his dead wife's posthumous reputation against would-be biographers" (48-49).

behind whom he insists on so often hiding himself and whose necks I, for one, should continually like to wring, whose bodies I would fain kick out of the way, *in order to get with the poet himself*, and hear his own voice speaking his own thoughts, man to man, soul to soul.<sup>28</sup>

Unsurprisingly, intersubjectivity is of central importance to *The Aspern Papers*, and comes to the fore most prominently in the narrator's interactions with Miss Tina, Juliana's so-called niece. Tina represents the most significant of the narrator's blind spots. Despite his prurient fascination with Aspern and Juliana's relationship and his need to obtain epistolary proof of and insight into their liaison, he apparently never recognizes the very real possibility that Tina might be Aspern's illegitimate daughter and therefore that the most tangible proof of what he is searching for might be right in front of him.<sup>29</sup> Certainly we are given every reason to believe that the narrator is underestimating Tina's mental powers. In the next paragraph, for instance, while describing, at his behest, "the brilliant life [she and her aunt] had led years before," Tina mentions an old acquaintance of theirs, "the *avvocato* Pochintesta, who wrote beautiful poems and had addressed one to her aunt" (*AP*, 84). Her reference to an enamored suitor composing poems to Juliana, of course, raises not only the specter of Aspern but also the question of what Tina knows or suspects about the narrator's motivations for lodging with them.

The narrator goes to great lengths to convince himself that Tina herself is, as he

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick J. Furnivall, "Foretalk," in *On the Poet Objective and Subjective: On the Latter's Aim, On Shelley as Man and Poet* (London: Browning Society, 1881), 3, emphasis added. A reprint was the first publication of *The Browning Society's Papers*, which was sent to members between 1881 and 1891.

<sup>29</sup> Hence, perhaps, the narrator's early reference to Emma Hamilton, the mistress of Admiral Nelson and mother of his daughter, Horatia. "The strange thing had been for me to discover in England that [Juliana] was still alive: it was as if I had been told Mrs. Siddons was, or Queen Caroline, or the famous Lady Hamilton," the narrator reports (*AP*, 47). In fact, all three of these women have connections to illicit love. The actress Sarah Siddons was known for her dramatic portrayals of abandoned women on the stage, while Queen Caroline was infamous for having been repudiated by her husband, King George IV, and forced to live on her own, a scandalous and humiliating predicament. I am grateful to Anthony Curtis's notes to the Penguin edition of the novella for these insights. By his account "these three historical women are carefully chosen for possible parallels between their careers and that of the elder Miss Bordereau" (*AP*, 264n6).



puts it, “a perfectly artless and considerably witless woman” (*AP*, 86). He even convinces himself that “It was possible . . . that [Tina] hadn’t even heard of him; it might very well be that Juliana had forborne to lift for innocent eyes the veil that covered the temple of her glory” (*AP*, 85). Clearly, in James’s novella, “none puts by the curtain” but Juliana, as evidenced by the green shade she wears. The narrator continually seems to underestimate Tina’s mental powers even as he grills her for information about Juliana’s past with Aspern. His obtuseness becomes fully apparent when his conclusion about it being “probable at all events that Miss Tina hadn’t read a word of [Aspern’s] poetry” is disproved almost as soon as he utters it (*AP*, 85). Shortly thereafter, the following conversation takes place:

“Oh *we* read him—we *have* read him,” she quietly replied.  
“He’s my poet of poets—I know him almost by heart.”  
For an instant Miss Tina hesitated . . . “Oh by heart—that’s nothing. . . . My aunt used to know him, to know him”—she paused an instant and I wondered what she was going to say—to know him as a visitor.” (*AP*, 87)

Here the question of knowledge comes up explicitly with respect to knowing Aspern (being familiar with his works versus knowing him in person—an issue that, as we have seen, preoccupied James with respect to Browning) but also implicit in the conversation is the question of what Tina and Juliana know or suspect about the narrator’s motivations for lodging with them. The effect of Tina’s admission on the narrator reveals much about his mind: “[I]t stirred me deeply as she dropped the words into the summer night; their sound might have been the light rustle of an old unfolded love letter” (*AP*, 88).

Throughout the narrator’s dealings with the Bordereaux women, the problem of other minds is construed as one of credulity and comprehension. “Why don’t you believe me?,” the narrator asks Tina at one point, to which she frankly responds, “Because I don’t

understand you” (*AP*, 86). The narrator clearly does not understand Tina either. When she makes comments that do not accord with what he needs to believe about her, he dismisses them as mere “contradictions that contributed to make her rather pleasingly incalculable and interesting” (*AP*, 59).

In fact, the drama of *The Aspern Papers* hinges on mutual misunderstanding, on representing an experience that comes tantalizingly close to genuine intersubjectivity and yet ultimately falls short. According to Edel, the “moral substance” of *The Aspern Papers* resides in its locating evil “not in Juliana’s ancient indiscretions or Jeffrey Aspern’s ‘love life’ [but rather] in the invasion of privacy, the failure to enter into human feeling.”<sup>30</sup> In the novella’s climactic scene, the narrator makes a series of ludicrous and self-serving assumptions about what Miss Tina must be thinking in order to justify his own behavior. As he retrospectively relates:

I held up my lamp, let the light play on the different objects as if it could tell me something. Still there came no movement from the other room. If Miss Tina was sleeping she was sleeping sound. Was she doing so—generous creature—on purpose to leave me the field? . . . I caught a glimpse of the possibility that Miss Tina wished me really to understand. If she didn’t so wish me . . . why hadn’t she locked the door of communication between the sitting room and the sala? That would have been a definite sign that I was to leave them alone. If I didn’t leave them alone she meant me to come for a purpose—a purpose now represented by the super-subtle inference that to oblige me she had unlocked the secretary. She hadn’t left the key, but the lid would probably move if I touched the button. This possibility pressed me hard and I bent very close to judge. I didn’t propose to do anything, not even—not in the least—to let down the lid; I only wanted to test my theory, to see if the cover *would* move. (*AP*, 123-24)

The narrator convinces himself of a sign from Tina, convinces himself that she “wished [him] really to understand.” Yet he clearly does not understand his own mind

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<sup>30</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 3:237.

and attempts to convince himself—and the reader—of the innocence of his intentions, that his actions were motivated by mere curiosity. Note how, bending down to examine the lock, he insists that he wanted only “to judge.” Earlier, Juliana had told him, “The truth is God’s, it isn’t man’s: we had better leave it alone. Who can judge of it—who can say?” (*AP*, 106). Fittingly, at this very moment, she catches him in the act. He describes “the climax of his crisis” as follows:

I touched the button with my hand—a mere touch would tell me; and as I did so—it is embarrassing for me to relate it—I looked over my shoulder. It was a chance, an instinct, for I had really heard nothing. . . . Juliana stood there in her night-dress, by the doorway of her room, watching me; her hands were raised, she had lifted the everlasting curtain that covered half her face, and for the first, the last, the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes. They glared at me; they were like the sudden drench, for a caught burglar, of a flood of gaslight; they made me horribly ashamed. (*AP*, 124-25)

Recall, here, Sartre’s account of the intersubjectivity of the look and the vulnerability attendant on the apprehension of *being looked at* and *being seen*. He describes the terror of finding oneself objectified by another’s gaze: “The look which the *eyes* manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are, is a pure reference to myself,” he writes.<sup>31</sup> For this reason, Sartre insists that in apprehending the look, one ceases to perceive the eyes that are doing the looking. In this vein, the narrator’s experience is made all the more traumatic by beholding Juliana’s “extraordinary eyes,” hitherto always concealed behind her veil, “for the first, the last, the only time.”

Sartre describes the scene of encounter with the other in a way that is almost uncannily similar to what happens in *The Aspern Papers*:

Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am

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<sup>31</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 347.

alone and on the level of a non-thetic self-consciousness. This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are in no way *known*; *I am my acts* and hence they carry in themselves their whole justification. . . . No transcending view comes to confer upon my acts the character of a *given* on which a judgment can be brought to bear. My consciousness sticks to my acts, it *is* my acts; and my acts are commended only by the ends to be attained and by the instruments to be employed. . . . It is the end to be attained which organizes all the moments which precede it. The end justifies the means; the means do not exist for themselves outside the end.<sup>32</sup>

In this vein, recall, too, Langbaum's argument that the dramatic monologue is structured around the tension between sympathy and judgment. Compare this with the following description of how *The Aspern Papers* works offered by J. Hillis Miller:

[I]t is as though we are readers, or, better, I as reader since it is an intimate and singular experience, had been made the overhearer of a murmuring internal voice of narration that is going over and over the facts of the case as remembered, trying to put them in order, above all trying to justify itself. . . . The reader, in any case, is put by the narrator's deposition in the position of the conscience, the judge or jury. It is as if we had demanded this accounting and had taken upon ourselves the responsibility of evaluating it for plausibility and credibility, then judging it. We have to pronounce, "Guilty" or "Innocent." If the verdict is "Guilty," we must decide on what punishment should be meted out.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, *The Aspern Papers* thematizes the tension between sympathy and judgment that is central to the dramatic monologue. Significantly, the narrator describes his *own* role as a literary historian and "appointed minister" of Jeffrey Aspern's posthumous legacy in precisely these same terms. Describing the lengths to which he and his colleague John Cumnor have gone in their research, he declares:

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<sup>32</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 348.

<sup>33</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "History, Narrative, and Responsibility: Speech Acts in *The Aspern Papers*," in *Enacting History in Henry James: Narrative, Power, and Ethics*, ed. Gert Buelens (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 194.

We held, justly, as I think, that we had done more for [Aspern's] memory than anyone else, and had done it simply by opening lights into his life. He had nothing to fear from us because he had nothing to fear from the truth. . . . His early death had been the one dark spot, as it were, on his fame, unless the papers in Miss Bordereau's hands should perversely bring out others. There had been an impression about 1825 that he had "treated her badly," just as there had been an impression that he had "served," as the London populace says, several other ladies in the same masterful way. Each of these cases Cumnor and I had been able to investigate, and we had never failed to acquit him conscientiously of any grossness. I judged him perhaps more indulgently than my friend; certainly at any rate, it appeared to me that no man could have walked straighter in the given circumstances. (48)

In one fell swoop, the narrator justifies his own behavior—what Tina calls "pry[ing] into [Aspern's] life" (*AP*, 88)—and the dead poet's womanizing, heartbreaking ways.<sup>34</sup> There is a disconnect between the narrator's prurient fascination with and desire to obtain proof of Aspern's illicit relationship to Juliana and his staunch insistence, at the same time, on the poet's innocence of "any grossness" in the matter. He declares:

"Orpheus and the Maenads" had been of course my foreseen judgment when I first turned over his correspondence. Almost all the Maenads were unreasonable and many of them unbearable; it struck me that he had been kinder and more considerate than in his place—if I could imagine myself in any such box—I should have found the trick of. (*AP*, 48)

What the narrator does not grasp is that to put oneself in another's place requires—for it is constituted by—suspending one's capacity for judgment.

*The Aspern Papers* is dominated by the question of relationality: *how* two people are related to one another (are they acquaintances or are they intimates?); *what* is the nature of the relationship (as in the narrator's obsession with Juliana and Jeffrey); and so on. It is fitting, therefore, that in the end the narrator's possession of the papers is made

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<sup>34</sup> Recall, here, how the revelation, in 1858, that Shelley had deserted his first wife prompted Browning to reconceive his relationship to his Romantic predecessor.

contingent on his relation to Miss Tina. “If you were a relation it would be different,” she tells him (*AP*, 135), a statement commonly taken to mean that, as Edel phrases it, “the Aspern papers could be his if he only became a member of the family.”<sup>35</sup> This is certainly a valid and viable reading; despite how little is said on the subject, there is virtually no room for doubt about the specific outcome Miss Tina’s words portend and intend. Here, again, we see the James calling upon the tactic of intersubjective reading. Significantly, Tina’s suggestion perplexes the narrator: “I wondered. ‘If I were a relation—?’,” he echoes and leaves the sentence unfinished, as though the outcome of her insinuation that they marry were unfathomable to him. This “bewilderment” is revealing (*AP*, 138). Evidently the prospect of establishing a legitimate, legal tie to her through marriage never seriously has occurred to him as a possibility, notwithstanding his willingness, expressed to Mrs. Prest at the outset, to “make love to the niece” if need be (*AP*, 53). “If you were not a stranger . . . Anything that is mine would be yours” (*AP*, 135). Since, by her own account, she does not understand him, he can only be a stranger—be strange—to her.

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A few pages before *The Aspern Papers* reaches its conclusion, the narrator wanders the streets of Venice and contemplates the prospect before him: with Juliana dead, he has the opportunity to marry Tina and come into possession of the letters he has coveted for so long. Surprisingly, he finds that he is reluctant to do so. “I couldn’t, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous pathetic provincial old woman,” he tells himself (*AP*, 138). As he agonizes over this situation of his own making, he pauses in

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<sup>35</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 3:221.

front of the church in the piazza and looks up to behold “the small square-jawed face of Bartolomeo Colleoni,” an “incomparable” statue of “the terrible *condottiere*,” sitting “sturdily astride his huge bronze horse”:

I only found myself staring at the triumphant captain as if he had an oracle on his lips. The western light shines into all his grimness at that hour and makes it wonderfully personal. But he continued to look far over my head, at the red immersion of another day—he had seen so many go down into the lagoon through the centuries—and if he were thinking of battles and stratagems they were of a different quality from any I had to tell him of. He wouldn’t direct me what to do, gaze up at him as I might. (*AP*, 139)



FIGURES 9 AND 10. *Left*: Statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni (1400-1475) by Andrea del Verrocchio in St. Mark’s Square, Venice, Italy. *Right*: Detail of what James’s *Aspern* narrator describes as “the small square-jawed face.” ARTstor.

Here we behold the narrator attempting to have an intersubjective encounter with an inanimate object, the bronze statue of a famous mercenary—and infamously merciless—

soldier [figs. 9 and 10]. Edel notes that “Aspern, in Austria, was . . . [w]here Napoleon met his first crushing defeat,” an allusion which underscores the narrator’s failure.<sup>36</sup>

The moment when the Aspern narrator confronts the Colleoni statue restages the closing of “My Last Duchess,” when the Duke exhorts the envoy to, “Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!”<sup>37</sup> In Browning’s poem, these lines reinforce the conclusions we have drawn about the Duke’s need to assert his power by subordinating others to his will, something he accomplishes by reducing living beings to immobile aesthetic objects (as with the duchess) and by refusing to recognize the dynamic otherness of their minds (as with the envoy). Here the *Aspern* narrator does a version of the same thing; having reduced Tina to a “poor deluded infatuated extravagant lady” (*AP*, 137) and “a ridiculous pathetic provincial old woman” (*AP*, 138), he looks to the statue of the “triumphant captain” for “an oracle” and, unsurprisingly, fails to find the guidance he seeks. Yet although the narrator admits that the statue “couldn’t direct [him] what to do,” he does not attribute this inability to provide guidance to its status as an object; to the contrary, he imagines the mounted figure to be “thinking of battles and stratagems . . . of a different quality from any I had to tell him of.” In this way he endows the statue with a mind, and an impenetrable one at that. Note the irony of how his personification first transforms the statue’s “grimness” into an expression “wonderfully personal”; it is as though, like the Duke, the narrator initially sees the statue as existing *for* him. But this expression is only

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<sup>36</sup> Edel, *Life of HJ*, 3:224.

<sup>37</sup> In *The Brownings: Their Life and Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), Lilian Whiting reports that the poets never tired of lingering in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence, where a “colossal fountain of Neptune” sits next to a “great equestrian statue of Cosimo I,” a monument that is quite comparable to the Colleoni statue in Venice described by James (113-14). Since the novelist was residing in Florence for most of the period in which he wrote *The Aspern Papers*, these two statues—which, according to Whiting, “always engaged” the Brownings’ attention (114)—may have figured in his imagination as well.



the result of “western light,” for, as the narrator tells us, “the air was aglow with the sunset” (139). As the narrator watches the statue gaze into the distance “at the red immersion of another day” and remarks, “he had seen so many go down into the lagoon through the centuries,” we might remember the Duke’s description of “the dropping of the daylight in the West” and how he uses it to justify his taking of another duchess.

These two moments of failed intersubjective encounter bear upon George Poulet’s description of the unique form of intersubjectivity attendant on the experience of reading and the temptation to seek out that experience in other media, to no avail. Unread books, he declares, are like caged animals for sale, waiting to “be delivered from the shame of being treated as objects,” waiting for “an act of man” to “transform their existence” from “paper and ink” into concepts and ideas. He continues:

It would never occur to me to walk around a sewing machine or to look at the under side of a plate. I am quite content with the face they present to me. But statues make me want to circle around them . . . I wonder why. Isn’t it because they give me the illusion that there is something in them which, from a different angle, I might be able to see?

For Poulet, the problem represented by the statue is that it does not seem “fully revealed by the unbroken perimeter of its surfaces”; on the contrary, it appears to promise depth.

He describes his thought process as follows:

In addition to its surfaces [a statue] must have an interior. What this interior might be, that is what intrigues me and makes me circle around them, as though looking for the entrance to a secret chamber. But there is no such entrance . . . We can have no true rapport—whence my sense of uneasiness.<sup>38</sup>

As we will discover in the next chapter, James continued to search for an “entrance” to Browning’s interior well after the poet’s death.

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<sup>38</sup> Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” 53.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **“A Restless Refinement of Homage”: James’s Posthumous Critical Tributes to Browning**

In the last chapter, I demonstrated some of the subtle ways in which James’s *The Aspern Papers* echoes Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” and I suggested that these myriad allusions serve to register the novella’s formal debt to the mode of intersubjective reading pioneered in the dramatic monologue. I concluded by focusing on the pivotal moment in which the *Aspern* narrator stands in St. Mark’s Square and gazes up at the “small square-jawed face” of the statue of the “terrible *condottiere*,” Bartolomeo Colleoni, who, in turn, simply remains fixed on “the high pedestal on which Venetian gratitude maintains him” and “continue[s] to look far over [the narrator’s] head” in the direction of the setting sun (*AP*, 139). This scene finds another intriguing complement in a piece James wrote about Browning shortly after the poet’s death in, of all places, Venice on 12 December 1889.<sup>1</sup> James’s essay “Browning in Westminster Abbey” was published anonymously—I will return to this point later—in the inaugural issue of a liberal review called *The Speaker* on 4 January 1890, four days after the poet’s burial. In the essay, James purports to describe the funeral proceedings, but the piece is much more than a straightforward account of the

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of his death, Browning was in Italy visiting his son and daughter-in-law at their new home, the Palazzo Rezzonico, where Pen was beginning an expensive, multi-year restoration project. Situated on the Grand Canal, the Rezzonico was not far from the Ca’ Alvisi, the longtime Venetian residence of Katherine Bronson, where both Browning and James had been known to stay for extended periods. Mrs. Bronson had purchased a new home around this time as well, a country retreat called “La Mura” in the nearby village of Asolo. Browning himself was negotiating the purchase of property in Asolo when he died. His final volume of verse, entitled *Asolando*, was dedicated to Mrs. Bronson; it was published the same day he passed away. His daughter-in-law’s memoir gives a firsthand account of the last weeks of the poet’s life and the return of his body to England; see Fannie Barrett Browning, *Some Memories of Robert Browning* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1928), 18-33.

burial ceremony. As I will show, “Browning in Westminster Abbey” constitutes one of James’s most complex treatments of the rights of the public to peer into the private life of the writer, a subject that grew increasingly important to the novelist as he aged and achieved a kind of celebrity status. In this regard, the essay rekindles a theme James had explored not only in *The Aspern Papers* but also, as in we discussed in Chapter 1, in his early-career reviews of Sainte-Beuve and the biographical method. At the same time, as we will see, James’s piece adds an intersubjective dimension to the longstanding tradition of critical reflection on the poetic imagination, a discussion to which Browning also had contributed in the “Essay on Shelley.”

“Browning in Westminster Abbey” was composed and published less than three years after *The Aspern Papers*, so it is not altogether surprising that the essay—which, by virtue of its occasion, required James to reflect on the posthumous reputation of a famous poet—raises issues about the competing claims of privacy and posterity similar to those he had examined in the earlier novella. More fascinating is that James actually recycles the *Aspern* narrator’s imagery in his account of Browning’s funeral. In what is perhaps the most striking instance of this, he describes the blank stares of the memorial busts that decorate Poets’ Corner [fig. 12]:

They [the dead] are a company in possession, with a high standard of distinction, of immortality, as it were; for there is something serenely inexpugnable even in the position of the interlopers. As they look out, in the rich dusk, from the cold eyes of statues and the careful identity of tablets, they seem, with their converging faces, to scrutinize decorously the claims of each new recumbent glory, to ask each other how he is to be judged as an accession. (“BWA,” 787)

The similarity between this description and the narrator’s contemplation of the Colleoni statue reveals a more substantial linkage between the real-life figure of Robert Browning

and the fictional narrative of *The Aspern Papers*, a connection that has hitherto gone virtually unrecognized.<sup>2</sup> In this vein, observe how James's rhetoric in the passage quoted here not only echoes the *Aspern* narrator's militaristic diction—for example, in the observation about how there is “something serenely *inexpugnable* even in the position of the *interlopers*”—but does so in a way that connotes invasion or violation, the central themes of the novella (my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> Note, too, in keeping with our earlier discussion of the dramatic monologue, the emphasis James places on judgment, on the question of how “[Browning] is to be judged as an accession.” Implicit is the suggestion that Browning is—or is perceived as—the interloper, a bull in the china shop of the ‘temple of silence and reconciliation,’ as James, quoting Macaulay, refers to the Abbey, the final resting place of so many “historic names and figures” (“BWA,” 787).

Indeed, Browning's burial in the Abbey had occasioned no small controversy. As the biographer Iain Finlayson explains, permission initially had been granted simply for a memorial service, but after pressure was applied by the poet's publisher, George Murray Smith, the offer was “upgraded” to include a well-situated tomb just below Chaucer and close to Spenser [fig. 11]. Public debate ensued, with detractors objecting that space in the “crowded Abbey” was too limited to allow for such an inscrutable poet as Browning.<sup>4</sup>

In “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” James defends Browning's interment there,

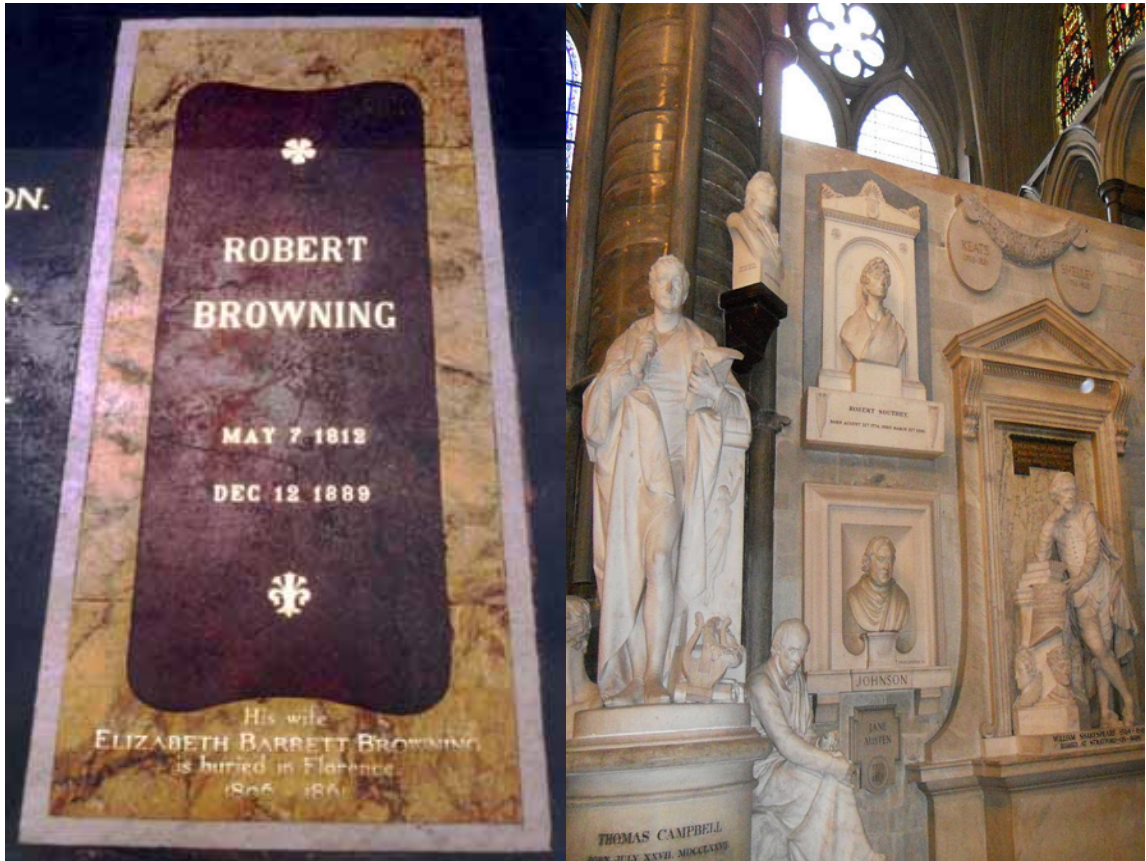
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<sup>2</sup> Taking James's notebook entries describing the novella's genesis at face value, critics have tended to view Jeffrey Aspern as a fictional composite of Byron and Shelley while overlooking Browning entirely. Perhaps for this reason, Posnock does not discuss *The Aspern Papers* in *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning*, as I noted in the Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “inexpugnable, *adj.*”: “That cannot be taken by assault or storm; incapable of being overcome, subdued, or overthrown by force; impregnable, invincible. a. *lit.* of a fortress, an army, etc.” *OED*, s.v. “interloper, *n.*”: “1. a. *orig.* An unauthorized trader; one who trespasses on the rights or privileges of any trade monopoly. . . . b. *transf.* One who, esp. for his own profit, thrusts himself into any position or affair, which others consider as pertaining solely to themselves.” Online edition at [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com). Accessed 19 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Iain Finlayson, *Browning: A Private Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 696.

insisting that the poet is “quite as representative as any” other member of the “pale company,” despite possessing “a surface un-suggestive of marble and a reckless individualism of form” that might seem out of place (“BWA,” 790).



FIGURES 11 AND 12. *Left:* Robert Browning’s grave in Poets’ Corner, Westminster Abbey, London. The stone marker was laid down in 1894 and the inscription about EBB added in 1906. *Right:* A selection of the memorial busts and statues in Poets’ Corner. © 2014 The Dean and Chapter of the Collegiate Church of St. Peter Westminster, <http://westminster-abbey.org/>

Nonetheless, James opens with an acknowledgement of Browning’s controversial reputation, envisioning the other celebrated men of letters whose bodies are entombed in the Abbey—whom he conjures as “the marble phantoms at the base of the great pillars and the definite personalities on the honorary slabs” (“BWA,” 788)—deliberating over whether a “poet without a lyre” (“BWA,” 789) like Browning merits inclusion in their “illustrious” company (“BWA,” 790) [fig. 10]. In James’s depiction, Browning’s stiff,

solemn, and stone-faced predecessors are flummoxed by his presence among them; the novelist envisions the dead men scratching their heads and struggling to “puzzle out” (“BWA,” 788) the “great mystery” Browning’s “imperfect conquest of the poetic form” (“BWA,” 789). As James observes:

It is as classics on one ground and another . . . that the numerous assembly in the Abbey holds together, and it is as a tremendous and incomparable modern that the author of “Men and Women” takes his place in it. . . . The tradition of the poetic character as something high, detached, and simple, which may be assumed to have prevailed among them for a good while, is one that Browning has broken at every turn; so that we can imagine his new associates to stand about him . . . with rather a sense of failing measures. (“BWA,” 788)

Implicit in James’s repeated descriptions of Browning as “modern” is the notion that the poet’s work transcends his own literary-historical moment; Browning, James suggests, was writing beyond the tradition of his contemporaries. (It a very fitting coincidence that James insistently classifies the poet as “modern” just when the movement retrospectively designated as modernism was beginning to take shape.) The novelist presents Browning’s “bewildering modernness” as a function of generic amalgamation, describing him as a maverick whose unorthodox combination of dramatic and narrative modes puts him so far ahead of his time that literary history is not prepared to accept him into its ranks (“BWA,” 787-88). Other critics soon began to echo James’s account. Assessing the state of English verse after Tennyson’s passing in 1892, for instance, the critic E. C. Stedman, a friend of James, proclaimed that, from a poetic standpoint, the Victorian Period had come to an end. Queen Victorian still held the throne, but, according to Stedman, the death of Tennyson was the death of Victorian Poetry as such. Notably, Stedman does *not* include Browning as part of the tradition whose passing he laments; “Browning,” he

writes, “seems . . . rather the forerunner of a new era than the representative of his own.”<sup>5</sup>

We will return to Browning’s modernism, more specifically to his impact on the modernist novel à la James, later in this chapter as well as in the Conclusion.

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Like much of James’s lesser-known non-fiction prose, the essay “Browning in Westminster Abbey” has received little critical attention, notwithstanding the frequency of quotation—all too frequently taken out of context—of its most famous line, “We possess a great man most when we begin to look at him through the glass plate of death” (“BWA,” 788). This has been taken to mean that death enables a clearer, more definitive understanding of a man’s character—that it allows one to see him more fully—but in fact the complete sentence is not nearly so straightforward, so easy to “possess,” as it were. Taken in full, the intricate passage reads as follows:

We possess a great man most when we begin to look at him through the glass plate of death; and it is a simple truth, though containing an apparent contradiction, that the Abbey never strikes us so benignantly as when we have a valued voice to commit to silence there. For the silence is articulate after all, and in worthy instances the preservation great. It is the other side of the question that would pull most the strings of irresponsible reflection—all those conceivable postulates and hypotheses of the poetic and satiric mind to which we owe the picture of how the bishop ordered his tomb in St. Praxed’s (“BWA,” 787)

Here James seems to be suggesting that the best and most “worthy” reaction to death is to “preserv[e]” the silence it has forced upon the individual whose life it has claimed. This, certainly, represents a marked contrast from the *Aspern* narrator’s desire to open “lights

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<sup>5</sup> E. C. Stedman, “Tennyson,” *New York Tribune*, 7 October 1892; quoted in *Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman*, ed. Laura Stedman and George M. Gould, 2 vol. (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1910), 2:66.

into [the late poet's] life" (*AP*, 47) by unearthing information about his romantic past. It also, more importantly, stands at odds with James's own declaration regarding Sainte-Beuve—"We confess that, touching such a man . . . our curiosity is infinite; we feel as it we could never learn enough about him"—in his early review advocating that the French critic's letters be published "as completely as possible." James's view of the biographical method, that is, appears to have shifted drastically between 1880, when—as I discussed in Chapter 1—he averred that Sainte-Beuve's "intellectual fecundity was so unbounded that . . . the history of his individual opinions would throw a preternaturally brilliant light upon the laws of the human mind at large," and 1887, when he ironized that conviction in *The Aspern Papers*.<sup>6</sup> By the time he writes Browning's funeral essay in the waning days of 1889, James is advocating silence as the only proper response to the death of a "great man," even as he paradoxically maintains that silence to be "articulate."

The "glass plate of death" connotes portraiture, and James's rhetorical maneuver in invoking it here is uncomfortably similar to that used by the Duke of Ferrara, with his apparent need to reduce his wife's vitality to a single, fixed image. In his declaration that "the Abbey never strikes us so benignantly as when we have a valued voice to commit to silence there," novelist expresses what sounds, oddly, almost like relief—for it certainly, though surprisingly, is not grief—that Browning will produce no more.<sup>7</sup> And yet James himself cannot remain silent, even as he suggests that to do otherwise would be a form of "irresponsible reflection." Like the Duke, he cannot resist the allure of other minds; in particular, he wonders what "conceivable postulates and hypotheses" Browning might

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<sup>6</sup> HJ, rev. of *Correspondence de C. A. Sainte-Beuve (1822-69)*, *North American Review* 130 (January 1880), repr. in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Etc.*, 673.

<sup>7</sup> "Speech is of Time. Silence is of Eternity," Thomas Carlyle famously proclaimed in *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (1833-34; repr., New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 166.



have entertained on such an occasion. The opening of the essay suggests that he recognizes this contradiction. “The lovers of a great poet,” he begins by proclaiming, “are the people in the world who are most to be forgiven a little wanton fancy about him, for they have before them, in his genius and work, an irresistible example of the imaginative method applied to a thousand subjects” (“BWA,” 786). Here James attempts to exonerate individuals like the *Aspern* narrator—and, more to the point, himself—by insisting they be “forgiven” for harboring “a little wanton fancy” about the poet’s life. Such “fancy,” James intimates, is but the natural result of the capacity of great verse to stimulate the reader’s imagination. In witnessing to “the application of the imaginative method to a thousand subjects,” according to James, the reader is moved to allow his imagination to range freely over the details of the poet’s biography, and, significantly, to engage in a kind of meta-imagination, imagining what the poet might have imagined, what might have occasioned him to imagine it, and so forth. As James presents it, this happens almost inevitably: faced with the apparent boundlessness of the poetic imagination—its creative freedom to select any one of “a thousand subjects”—the reader quite naturally finds his own “wanton fancy” turning to reflect upon the life of the mind responsible for producing such works. If virtually no subject is off-limits to the creative writer, James suggests, then surely those fantasies the “lovers of a great poet” might harbor about his personal life—even the contents of his mind—ought to be “forgiven”; after all, the poet is responsible for activating the reader’s imagination in the first place. Thus, as James describes it, the poet’s “irresistible example” works to engender an imitative impulse in his audience via the implicit imaginative contagion—a version of the phenomenon that I have termed *reading intersubjectively*.

After this brief and semi-apologetic justification at the outset of the essay, James proceeds to exercise his own “wanton fancy” with abandon, imagining his way into a wide range of other minds in quick succession. Although the main point James seems to want to make is fairly straightforward—namely that Browning would have been “taken with” (“BWA,” 786) his burial and would have made the public display of pomp and circumstance into a humorously self-referential and bafflingly philosophical poem—James’s approach to it is characteristically oblique. In keeping with Posnock’s account of the James-Browning relationship, that is, the novelist seems unwilling, perhaps unable, to confront the poet directly, to get beyond the social persona and “project [him]self into the consciousness” of another, as he once phrased it himself in describing the technology of the dramatic monologue.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, James does *not* represent how *he* himself, Henry James, imagines Browning would view the situation, at least not directly; instead, he offers a circuitous and mediated version of his imaginings in that regard, one that stresses the perception of Browning’s *audience*.<sup>9</sup> For James, it seems, Browning exists primarily as a function of his “many confirmed admirers.” James writes:

Certainly, therefore, there are many confirmed admirers of Robert Browning to whom it will not have failed to occur that the consignment of his ashes to the great temple of fame of the English race was exactly one of those occasions in which his own analytic spirit would have rejoiced and his irrepressible faculty for looking at human events in all sorts of slanting colored lights have found a signal opportunity. If he had been taken with it as a subject, if it had moved him to the confused yet comprehensive utterance of

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<sup>8</sup> HJ, unpublished review of *John Godfrey’s Fortunes* by Bayard Taylor, quoted in Edel, “Autobiography in Fiction: An Unpublished Review by Henry James,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 11(1957): 256. The sentence, which I quoted in passing in the Introduction, reads as follows: “*To project yourself into the consciousness of a person essentially your opposite requires the audacity of great genius* and even men of genius are cautious in approaching the problem.”

<sup>9</sup> For critical discussions of Browning’s his relationship to his audience, see Lee Erickson, *Robert Browning: His Poetry and His Audiences* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), 1984; see also Dorothy Mermin, *The Audience in the Poem: Five Victorian Poets* (Rutgers: Univ. Press of New Jersey), 1983.

which he was the great professor, we can immediately guess at some of the sparks he would have scraped from it[.] (“BWA,” 786)

Again, James’s attempt to approach Browning’s imagination puts him at a remove from his subject. We are presented with what *he*, Henry James, thinks that *Browning’s fans* must be thinking about what *the poet* would be thinking about the occasion *if* he were alive. To the contemporary critical eye, such perspectival foliation is likely to seem particularly Jamesian; notably, however, in both this piece and, as we’ll see shortly, his later essay in honor of the Browning Centennial, James explicitly attributes it to the poet’s own distinctive aesthetic. What James finds most commendable about Browning is his “restlessness of psychological research,” what James describes as his “unprejudiced intellectual eagerness to put himself in other people’s place” and take “what may be termed the inside point of view” (“BWA,” 788-89).

James emulates this aspect of Browning’s verse in the funeral essay. In paying homage to Browning, that is, he uses the poet’s dramatic method to render multiple other minds, shifting between—and even sometimes superimposing—what we might think of as different “centers of consciousness,” to use the phrase James himself used to describe his technique. The array of other minds James conjures ranges from the various “admirers and mourners” in attendance at Browning’s interment to the “marble phantoms” of the other great men buried in the Abbey, from the poet himself—described as “a tremendous and incomparable modern”—to the “patient critic” who is tasked with “digging to the primary soil from which so many disparities and contradictions spring” (“BWA,” 789). In all cases, the “center,” if there can be said to be one, is Browning: in what amounts to an intersubjective maneuver, James imagines how others would imagine the poet imagining.

First, James makes a claim upon the minds of his readers, asserting that it cannot “have failed to occur” to Browning’s admirers that the poet would have been taken with the topic of his funeral, the public commemoration of a controversial poet, one from whom “so many people would withhold the distinctive wreath” (“BWA”, 788).<sup>10</sup> (The novelist’s penchant for dialecticism is so entrenched that it seems he cannot imagine the minds of Browning’s admirers without simultaneously considering the poet’s detractors.) From a rhetorical standpoint, this circuitous opening is of dubious necessity; James’s point—that Browning’s “own analytic spirit would have rejoiced” at the irony of the occasion—does not require the mediation of the poet’s “many confirmed admirers.” Indeed, throughout the piece James repeatedly interposes the poet’s fans between him and the imaginative construct of Browning he conjures. Although the Browning portrayed is clearly James’s own version of the poet, he effectively conscripts his listeners into the illusion that they are co-creators of this imagined Browning. For instance, as soon as James begins to contemplate the sort of literary treatment the poet would have given to his death, to consider what might have been the result “[i]f [Browning] had been taken with . . . the subject,” he shifts perspective, adopting the second-person plural or so-called royal we: “*we* can immediately guess at some of the

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<sup>10</sup> With this invocation of the “distinctive wreath,” or laurel, James alludes to the fact that Browning was not selected to be Poet Laureate of England after William Wordsworth’s death in 1850. The honor instead went to Tennyson, Browning’s co-pioneer in the development of the dramatic monologue, and as a result of this their reputations diverged sharply. Although not mentioned explicitly, Tennyson’s glorification looms over James’s eulogy, becoming perhaps most evident in the novelist’s sarcastic reference to “so foregone a conclusion as that England should pay her greatest honor to one of her greatest poets” (“BWA,” 786). Here, as indeed throughout the piece, James undermines the critical authority of the literary establishment no less than that of the reading public, ironizing their mutual desire to celebrate Browning’s achievement only after his demise. As I observed earlier, James’s remark that, “the Abbey never strikes us so benignantly as when we have a valued voice to commit to silence there,” expresses a sentiment that hardly seems appropriate for the occasion (“BWA,” 787). The mention of the “distinctive wreath” is similarly barbed. The full sentence reads: “There are plenty of poets whose right to the title may be contested, but there is no poetic head of equal power—*crowned and recrowned by almost importunate hands*—from which so many people would withhold the distinctive wreath” (emphasis added). James assumes an attitude of veneration reminiscent of the *Aspern* narrator even as he suggests that public veneration has the potential to be “importunate.”

sparks he would have scraped from it, guess how splendidly . . . the pictorial sense would have intertwined itself with the metaphysical” (emphasis added). Again, James’s gesture invokes an intersubjective community akin to Husserl’s description of how, “in our continuously flowing world-perceiving we are not isolated but rather . . . [are] *living with one another*” understanding becomes “communalized.”<sup>11</sup>

James’s discomfort with putting himself in Browning’s place—even when he is occupying that place along with others in the intersubjective sense mentioned above—becomes manifest almost immediately. He draws back, effacing himself from the scene:

At any rate, as they stood in the Abbey Tuesday last those of his admirers and mourners who were disposed to profit by his warrant for inquiring curiously, may well have let their fancy range, with its muffled step, in the direction which *his* fancy would probably not have shrunk from following, even perhaps to the dim corners where humor and the whimsical lurk. (“BWA,” 786)

“At any rate” signals a shift into the impersonal third-person perspective. James is utterly absent from this sentence, though he was most certainly in attendance at the funeral. In other words, while he was among those who “stood in the Abbey Tuesday last,” in the published account of the proceedings, the novelist removes himself from the throng of “admirers and mourners” even as he tries, earlier in the same paragraph, to adopt what he imagines to be their perspective. Strangely, but wholly in keeping with this personal remove, James insisted that his account of the funeral—which, as the excerpts I have quoted should make clear, is much more of an elegiac tribute than it is journalistic report—be published without his name. In a letter to *The Speaker*’s founder and editor in which he enclosed what he described as his “misbegotten article,” a piece he says was “really very difficult” and maintains he “didn’t want to do,” James concluded with an

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<sup>11</sup> Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, 163.

exclamatory reminder: “P.S. Kindly remember that I go in for inscrutable anonymity!”<sup>12</sup>

One cannot help but recall the moment, halfway through *The Aspern Papers*, when the narrator experiences a sudden pang of conscience in conversation with Tina and describes himself as feeling “almost as base as the reporter of a newspaper who forces his way into a house of mourning” (*AP*, 100).

As in his opening reference to the poet’s “irresistible example” and the reader’s “wanton fancy,” here James suggests that the poetic imagination is both contagious *and* mimetic. Browning’s “warrant for inquiring curiously” is depicted as yielding the kind of expansive experience Pater called “the fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness” for those who are willing to “let their fancy range, with its muffled step, in the direction which *his* [Browning’s] fancy would probably not have shrunk from following, even perhaps to the dim corners where humor and the whimsical lurk,” as James phrases it. Note both the extreme caution of James’s syntax—the sentence is laden with conditional verbs (“may well have let,” “would probably not have shrunk”) piled on top of qualifying adverbs (“probably,” “perhaps”)—and correspondingly furtive quality of its imagery (“muffled step,” “shrunk,” “dim corners,” “lurk”). Despite what the novelist says about the funeral-goers’ capacity to “profit” by emulating Browning’s penchant for “inquiring curiously,” James’s description of the hypothetical mourner allowing his “wanton fancy” to “range, with its muffled step” into “dim corners” makes exercise of the imaginative faculty into a clandestine quest à la the pursuit of Jeffrey Aspern’s letters.

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<sup>12</sup> HJ to Sir Thomas Wemyss Reid, 30 December [1889], in *HJ Letters*, 3:266. Part of James’s desire for the piece to appear without his name may have stemmed from a sense of embarrassment or inadequacy. The novelist says he fears that he has “worked quite away, in general, from the easy journalistic form” and expresses concern about whether or not the piece “will pass muster” (3:266).

In his preface to the New York Edition of *The Aspern Papers*, which was composed in 1908, nearly a decade after the novella appeared, James once again uses the metaphor of imagination as quest or, to use a word that gets repeated both there and in “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” *conquest*.<sup>13</sup> In the Preface, James likens the “discoveries” of “the seeking fabulist” to those of “the navigator”:

He *comes upon* the interesting thing as Columbus came upon the isle of San Salvador, because he had moved in the right direction for it—also because he knew, with the encounter, what “making land” then and there represented. Nature had so placed it, to profit—if as profit we may measure the matter!—by his fine unrest, just as history, “literary history,” we in this connexion call it, had in an out-of-the-way corner of the great garden of life thrown off a curious flower that I was to feel worth gathering as soon as I saw it. I got wind of my positive fact, I followed the scent.<sup>14</sup>

Here we might recall Poulet’s discussion of reading as a process of discovery, a form of exploration that transports one into the unique place occupied another mind, as we saw in the introduction. We might also think of James’s remark in his letter to Perry about “what Ste. Beuve and the best French critics have done for their” national literature, in which he described English letters as a “vast” and “unexplored field” and confessed to a desire, “[d]eep in the timorous resources of [his] being,” to be the one to explore that terrain.<sup>15</sup> Finally, we can discern echoes of the *Aspern* narrator’s single-minded determination to

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<sup>13</sup> In “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” James somewhat equivocally describes Browning’s achievement in terms of conquest, first proclaiming that the poet’s “modernness . . . achieves a kind of conquest, or at least extension, of the rigid pale” (“BWA,” 788) and later referring to “the imperfect conquest of the poetic form by a genius in which the poetic passion had such volume and range” (“BWA,” 789).

<sup>14</sup> HJ, “Preface to the New York Edition” of *The Aspern Papers*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> HJ to Thomas Sargent Perry, 20 September [1867], in *HJ Letters*, 1:76-77. James goes on to add: “But men don’t accomplish valuable results alone . . . It is by this constant exchange and comparison, by the wear and tear of living and talking and observing that works of art shape themselves into completeness; and as artists and workers, we owe most to those who bring to us most of human life” (77). Again, the remark is of a piece with Pater’s description of artistic progress via “multiplied consciousness.”

get hold of the letters.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the opening paragraph of the Preface bears a noticeable resemblance to the opening of the tale itself:

I not only recover with ease, but I delight to recall, the first impulse given to the idea of *The Aspern Papers*. It is at the same time true that my present mention of it may perhaps too effectually dispose of any complacent claim to my having “found” the situation. Not that I quite know indeed what situations the seeking fabulist does “find”; he seeks them enough assuredly, but his discoveries are, like those of the navigator . . . scarce more than alert recognitions.

Two more aspects of the opening of “Browning in Westminster Abbey” are worthy of notice in light of our discussion of James’s adaptations of the dramatic monologue à la Browning, beginning with his earliest tales and culminating in *The Aspern Papers*. Observe how, in trying to position himself inside Browning’s head—to consider “all those conceivable postulates and hypotheses of the poetic and satiric mind to which we owe the picture of how the bishop ordered his tomb in St. Praxed’s (“BWA,” 787)—James adopts the posture of a Browning monologist, which is also to say, as I have been arguing, that he assumes the role of one of his own first-person narrators. Thus, in the conjecture that, “*If* [Browning] had been taken with [his own funeral] as a subject, *if* it had moved him to the confused yet comprehensive utterance of which he was the great professor, we can immediately *guess* at some of the sparks he *would have* scraped from it” (emphasis added)—a statement whose compound conditionality offers a reminder of its speculative nature—we can hear echoes of both the Duke of Ferrara (“And seemed as

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the opening paragraph of the Preface bears a strong resemblance to the opening of the novella itself. Here is James’s account of the genesis of the novella in the Preface: “I not only recover with ease, but I delight to recall, the first impulse given to the idea of *The Aspern Papers*. It is at the same time true that my present mention of it may perhaps too effectually dispose of any complacent claim to my having “found” the situation. Not that I quite know indeed what situations the seeking fabulist does “find”; he seeks them enough assuredly, but his discoveries are, like those of the navigator . . . scarce more than alert recognitions. (*AP*, 27). Compare this with how the narrator opens the tale by similarly disavowing his own agency, saying that it was only because he “had taken Mrs. Prest into [his] confidence” that he was able to “advance” (*AP*, 45).



they would ask me, if they durst, / How such a glance came there . . .” [ll. 11-12]) and the *Aspern* narrator (“I guessed that she wished . . . to say severely: ‘Do you dream that you can get off with less than six months?’” [AP, 108]).<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of *The Aspern Papers*, observe, too, how James, consciously or not, alludes to his own earlier novella by evoking the aftermath of conflagration, first in the description of how Browning’s “ashes” have been consigned “to the great temple of fame of the English race”—a rather unusual choice of metaphor since the poet’s body was not cremated—and then again in the image of the poet “scrap[ing]” for “sparks” at the grate of his own fiery imagination. James’s evocation of “ashes” and “sparks, the by-products of combustion, suggest that the novelist’s memorial tribute to Browning prompted him to reconsider the competing claims of posthumous poetic posterity and personal privacy he had treated in *The Aspern Papers*. Once again, James’s rhetoric is eerily reminiscent of that used by the narrator, who declares himself to be the “appointed minister” of Aspern’s “temple” (AP, 47) and who, upon learning the papers he covets have been destroyed, says his “dream had been reduced to ashes” (AP, 131).<sup>18</sup>

In his account of Browning’s funeral, however, James appears to take a somewhat different approach to the topic: whereas the novella stresses the cost of fame, both for the

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<sup>17</sup> In all three cases, note how the effort to imagine other minds takes the form of a need to attribute speech to the other individuals in question. In this vein, interestingly, James describes the hypothetical poem that he envisions Browning writing not as a text or document but as a “confused yet comprehensive *utterance*” (emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> The narrator’s rhetoric prefigures the fiery destruction of the papers well before the end of the novella. Early in the story, he considers “the possibility of [Juliana] destroying her documents on the day she should feel her end at hand” (AP, 68). During a subsequent encounter, he is disturbed by the perception that “she looked terribly like an old woman who at a pinch would, even like Sardanapalus, burn her treasure” (AP, 91). Indeed, it is the narrator who actually suggests the burning of the letters to Tina: “The way [Juliana] would naturally destroy her letters would be to burn them,” he tells the younger woman, adding, “Now she can’t burn them without first, and she can’t get fire unless you give it to her” (AP, 101). Ironically, it never crosses his mind that Tina herself might commit what he calls the “dreadful sacrilege” on her aunt’s behalf (AP, 101), although he does worry about the possibility of the younger woman making a deathbed promise to keep them from him. He tells her, “I would rather [Juliana] had burnt the papers outright than have to reckon with such a treachery as that” (AP, 108).

poet and his admirers, here the emphasis falls on the collective benefits of his status as a public figure. After opening with a note of compassion for those “lovers of a great poet” who harbor “wanton fanc[ies]” about his personal life, James goes on to emphasize the positive cultural effects of such veneration, proclaiming that the death of a great poet, with all of the attendant ceremonies performed and honors conferred, constitutes “one of the high moment’s of a nation’s life” (“BWA,” 787). “The attitude of the public, of the multitude, at such hours, is a great expansion, a great openness to ideas of aspiration and achievement,” he declares, adding, “the pride of possession and of bestowal . . . is so present as to make regret a minor matter” (“BWA,” 787). While easy to overlook amidst James’s baroque effusions, this is an extraordinary claim, particularly when juxtaposed against *The Aspern Papers*, for the novelist suggests the public coming into “possession” of a renowned poet—via the ritual act of mourning, the “bestowal” of honors reserved exclusively for the deceased—essentially outweighs the loss of the individual as a person in his own right. While the ironic contraposition of “possession” and “bestowal,” with the attendant implication that the public gives in order that it may take, renders it difficult to gauge—to judge!—how earnest James is being here, that the notoriously guarded writer even gives voice to the notion is shocking. “[T]he pride of possession and of bestowal,” James writes, “especially in the case of a career so complete as Mr. Browning’s, is so present as to make regret a minor matter”: this sounds remarkably like one of the *Aspern* narrator’s elaborate self-justifications. Indeed, the idea that “possession” trumps “regret,” transforming it into “a minor matter,” is the conviction that enables the narrator to pursue his quest with relatively “minor” scruples. In his case, of course, possession is literalized in the form of the papers; it is also conjoined to death. Initially, it is Aspern’s death that,

as it were, stokes the flame of the narrator's desire for the papers; soon, however, he has convinced himself that their possession is contingent upon Juliana's death as well.

Then it came to me that she *was* tremendously old—so old that death might take her at any moment, before I should have time to compass my end. The next thought I had was a correction to that; it lighted up the situation. She would die next week, she would die tomorrow—then I could pounce on her possessions and ransack her drawers. (*AP*, 60)

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"We possess a great man most when we begin to look at him through the glass plate of death," James asserts, and yet if the piece itself offers any indication, Browning's death did not render him any less opaque to the novelist. Even in death, that is, Browning continues to elude James's grasp. Throughout "Browning in Westminster Abbey," we find the novelist circling back time and again to consider the poet's inscrutable mind and verse, specifically to wonder how Browning himself might have "render[ed] the multifold impression" of the memorial in his honor ("BWA," 787). James is mesmerized by this question: though he cannot answer it definitively, and though he repeatedly shrinks away from the kind of identification with Browning that would be required to attempt to do so, nevertheless he cannot stop posing it. James becomes, like the *Aspern* narrator, fixated on the poet yet unable to make a direct approach to the subject that most interests him. Instead, as we have seen, he uses a roundabout method, inhabiting a wide variety of other perspectives but quickly discarding each in favor of continuing to marvel at the mystery of the poet's genius ("BWA," 787). None of the other minds into which James projects himself in the course of the essay—from Browning's "many confirmed admirers" ("BWA," 786), to his "new associates" ("BWA," 788), the "historic names and figures"

whose ranks he joins (“BWA,” 787), to the “eventual critic, who will have to solve the refreshing problem” of his unusual legacy (“BWA,” 790)—proves as fascinating an object for the novelist’s contemplation.

To his credit, the novelist seems aware that Browning has become something of an *idée fixe* for him. After the disquisition from the vantage of the cold-eyed statues, for instance, James exclaims:

How difficult to banish the idea that Robert Browning would have enjoyed prefiguring and disintegrating the mystifications, the reservations, even perhaps the slight buzz of scandal in the Poet’s Corner, to which his own obsequies might give rise! Would not his great relish . . . have been his perception of the bewildering modernness, to much of society, of the new candidate for the niche? (“BWA,” 787-88)

Ironically, in imagining the impossible scenario of how Browning would view the funeral and the literary uses to which the poet would put his demise, James in effect describes his *own* position—the one he takes in writing the essay itself, as well as *The Aspern Papers* and fictionalizations of Browning such as “The Private Life.” Here, again, we see that even as James actively works to efface himself from the essay, insisting upon anonymity and refraining from the use of the first person, he nonetheless simultaneously—perhaps inevitably—inscribes his perspective within it. This insertion of selfhood becomes most apparent in another of James’s lengthy digressions, one in which he imagines the work ostensibly to be done by some future critic of Browning’s verse:

He [the patient critic] may finally even put his finger on some explanation of the great mystery, the imperfect conquest of the poetic form by a genius in which the poetic passion had such volume and range. He may say successfully how it was that a poet without a lyre—for that is practically Browning’s deficiency: he had the scroll, but not often the sounding strings—was nevertheless, in his best hours, wonderfully rich in the magic of his art, a magnificent master of poetic emotion. He will justify on

behalf of a multitude of devotees the great position assigned to a writer of verse of which the nature or fortune has been (in proportion to its value and quantity) to be treated rarely as quotable. He will do all this and a great deal more besides. . . . (“BWA,” 789)

The irony is that the work James envisions for this “patient critic”—later referred to as the “eventual critic”—is the very same work he is doing in writing the funeral essay and, later, as we are about to discover, in the lecture “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*.”

In the second half of “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” James, in the guise of “the patient critic,” finally begins to confront the loss represented by the poet’s death. “[W]e need not wait for it [future critical recognition] to feel that something of our latest sympathies, our latest and most restless selves, passed the other day into the high part—the show-part, to speak vulgarly—of our literature,” James asserts in what, but for its rather unusual interjection, would seem to amount to a conventional lament, a way of saying that a part of the reading public has died along with Browning (“BWA,” 789). “[W]hat he takes into the Abbey is an immense expression of life—of life rendered with large liberty and free experiment, with an unprejudiced intellectual eagerness . . . to participate in complications and consequences,” the novelist writes (“BWA,” 789). Here once again, we hear echoes of a well-known passage from James’s fiction, the *Aspern* narrator’s famous articulation of what he admires about the poet: his ability “to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to feel, understand, and express everything” (*AP*, 78).

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James concludes “Browning in Westminster Abbey” by saying that the poet’s legacy will be to have “widened the allowance, made the high abode more comfortable for some of those who are yet to enter it” (“BWA,” 790-91). By continuing this spatial metaphor, his lecture “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*,” delivered in front of the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature on 7 May 1912 as part of the centennial celebration of the poet’s birth, reads like an extension of—or, more precisely, an addendum to—the funeral essay. Indeed, James seems to have had the earlier piece in mind, for he opens by comparing Browning’s verse novel to a cathedral that sounds very much like Westminster Abbey [fig. 13]:

*The Ring and the Book* is so vast and so essentially gothic a structure, spreading and soaring and branching at such a rate, covering such ground, putting forth such pinnacles and towers and brave excrescences, planting its transepts and chapels and porticos, its clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness, that with any first approach we but walk vaguely and slowly, rather bewilderedly, round and round it, wonder at what point we had best attempt such entrance as will save our steps and light our uncertainty, most enable us to reach our personal chair, our indicated chapel or shrine, when once within. (“NRB,” 791)<sup>19</sup>

Note, first of all, the emphasis on scale: the overwhelming “vast[ness]” of the structure—“the affronting mass,” as James calls it in the next sentence, with “its clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness”—becomes even more “bewilder[ing]” as a result of its apparent expansion before our eyes as we read. The edifice is depicted as “spreading and soaring and branching at such a rate, covering such ground,” and so on, and the cumulative effect of the gerunds endows the sentence and the structure it describes with an air of activity.

The extended metaphor and the meandering sentence with which James expresses it serve

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<sup>19</sup> In “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” James mentions the cathedral’s “high arches, its dim transepts and chapels” and goes on to imagine the reaction of “the marble phantoms at the base of the great pillars” to the poet’s arrival (“BWA,” 787-88).

to underscore the sublimity he is describing while at the same time obfuscating the real object of the description. To put this in slightly different terms, the attention that James devotes to rendering the intricacies of the imagined gothic structure is so extensive that what I. A. Richards would call the “vehicle” of the metaphor effectively subsumes its “tenor,” in this case *The Ring and the Book*, the entity to which the structural qualities are being ascribed.<sup>20</sup> Like the verse novel to which James compares it, the description of the gothic cathedral is overwhelming, in part because it seems to refer beyond itself to encompass all that is mystifying about Browning and his extensive collection of dense and inscrutable works.



FIGURE 13. An exterior view of Westminster Abbey in London as rendered on a picture postcard by the Scottish publisher Valentine & Co. that was distributed circa 1907-14. From the George Watson Cole European Postcard Collection, Trinity College Watkinson Library, Hartford, Connecticut, Box 29.41-4. ID 538280. ARTstor.

<sup>20</sup> See I. A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), esp. 96-103.

*The Ring and the Book* showcases Browning at his finest. Based on a collection of legal documents from a 1698 Roman murder trial that the poet chanced upon at a market in Florence sometime around 1860, the verse novel's convoluted plot—James compares it to a “labyrinth” in his lecture (“NRB,” 792)—offers a series of different accounts of the events leading up and culminating in the trial of one Count Guido Franceschini, accused of having murdered his young wife, Pompilia Comparini, and adoptive parents.<sup>21</sup> The verse novel is comprised of monologues by nine different characters, including the murderer, Guido Franceschini, who speaks first on the stand and later as he awaits execution; Pope Innocent XII, who rejects his appeal; and Pompilia, his wife and victim, who gives testimony just before expiring of a stab wound. Canon Giuseppe Caponsacchi, a priest who endeavors to help Pompilia flee from Guido's cruelty but only succeeds in bringing jealous wrath upon them both, also offers his view, fervently denying Franceschini's allegations of cuckoldry. Lawyers for the defense and the prosecution also weigh in, as do a series of onlookers who debate the case and gossip about the scandal involved. The verse novel is arguably Browning's most characteristic work: erudite, perplexing, and, as James's conceit underscores, immense in scale: 21,000 lines divided over twelve books.

As Posnock notes, the trepidation with which James approaches the subject of *The Ring and the Book* invites comparison to his uneasiness, decades before, when confronted with Browning's gregarious social persona. Perhaps for this reason, as in his earlier piece “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” the novelist initially keeps a certain distance between himself and the poet by employing the third-person perspective: “the admirer is promptly

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<sup>21</sup> The Franceschini-Comparini trial has clear parallels to another Renaissance scandal that Browning had given poetic treatment, the death of Lucrezia de' Medici, Duchess of Ferrara.



held up . . . finds himself almost baffled by alternatives,” James writes, when forced to choose “between the dozen different aspects of one of the most copious of our poets . . . in respect to the most voluminous of his works” (“NRB,” 791). Yet it quickly becomes apparent that the “admirer,” much like the “patient critic” of “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” is a figure for James himself. It was with obvious anxiety that James first wrote to Edmund Gosse to accept the invitation to speak at the Browning Centennial:

I brace myself—not (for you will frown!) to say No, but literally (and though I quake in every limb as I form the letters), to say Yes! I hate it but I will do it; I fear it but I will brace it; I curse it but I will wreath it in smiles . . . I shall make up my distracted mind between two things: a shy at the subject of (as who should say), “The Browning of One’s Youth”; or, quite differently, a go at “*The Ring and the Book as a Novel*” (or perhaps better “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*”). I predominate toward the latter.<sup>22</sup>

“My Browning matter looms doubly formidable,” James confessed to Gosse two days later, still a full three months before the “rich retrospective day” on which he gave the address (“NRB,” 792).<sup>23</sup> James’s nervousness in the face of the task finds its way into the lecture itself in his opening description of how—and note how, again, he shifts into the second-person plural and conscripts the listener into his intersubjective community—“we but walk vaguely and slowly, rather bewilderedly, round and round” the figural edifice.

Posnock compares the “initial caution” of James’s approach to “the opening of the second half of *The Golden Bowl*; like Maggie, James tentatively explores the threatening yet enticing structure that looms before him.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, I want to draw a

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<sup>22</sup> HJ to Edmund Gosse, 5 February 1912, in *HJ Letters*, 4:601.

<sup>23</sup> HJ to Edmund Gosse, 7 February 1912, in *Selected Letters of Henry James to Edmund Gosse: A Literary Friendship, 1882-1915*, ed. Rayburn S. Moore (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1988), 262.

<sup>24</sup> Posnock, *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning*, 146. Posnock is referring to the following well-known passage from *The Golden Bowl* (1904; New York, Penguin, 1987), in which Maggie’s belated understanding of the latent infidelity at the heart of her marriage is figured in structural terms:

She had walked round and round it . . . looking up all the while at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out

comparison to the *The Aspern Papers*. For his approach to the gothic structure that is *The Ring and the Book*, James expresses a desire for access and illumination—“to reach our personal chair, our indicated chapel or shrine, when once within”—that is reminiscent of *Aspern* narrator’s wish to shed “light” on the poet’s life, memorably expressed as a need “to sit so fast” in the “temple” of the god to which he considers himself the “appointed minister” (*AP*, 46-47). Note how, at the outset of his lecture, James casts himself in the positional of the reverential worshipper. He justifies entering the cathedral on the grounds that it is only to the “inner view” that “the likeness of the literary monument to one of the great religious gives way a little, sustains itself less than in the first, the affronting mass” (“*NRB*,” 791). Here we should recall the opening of *The Aspern Papers*, how the narrator described himself “beating about the bush . . . [and] wondering by what combination of arts [he] might become an acquaintance, when [Mrs. Prest] offered the happy suggestion that the way to become an acquaintance was first to become an intimate” (*AP*, 45). In both cases, the implication would seem to be that the knowledge or understanding desired resides *within*, that it is an *interior* quality much like traditional views of consciousness.

The full opening passage, however, is more complicated:

For it is to be granted that to this inner view the likeness of the literary monument to one of the great religious gives way a little, sustains itself less than in the first, the affronting mass; unless we simply figure ourselves, under the great roof, looking about us through a splendid thickness and dimness of air, an accumulation

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as yet where she might have entered had she wished. She hadn’t wished till now—such was the odd case; and what was doubtless equally odd besides was that though her raised eyes seemed to distinguish places that must serve from within, and especially far aloft, as apertures and outlooks, no door appeared to give access from her convenient garden level. The great decorated surface had remained consistently impenetrable and inscrutable. (327-28)

This description is significant for our purposes for two reasons. First, Browning’s dramatic monologues foster precisely this kind of belated understanding. Second, James recycles the structural metaphor in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, a novel that bears traces of Browning’s influence, as I will show in the Conclusion.

of spiritual presences or unprofaned mysteries, that makes our impression heavily general—general only—and leaves us helpless for reporting on particulars. The particulars for our purpose have thus their identity much rather in certain features of the twenty faces—either of one or of another of these—that the structures turns to the outer day and that we can, as it were, sit down before and consider at our comparative ease. (“NRB,” 791)

Immediately upon suggesting that the “inner view” offers a better vantage from which to approach Browning’s verse novel than what he calls “the first, the affronting mass” of its exterior façade, however, James reverses that assessment. This reversal takes place in the guise of a qualification that makes it easy to overlook: “the literary monument . . . gives way a little . . . *unless* we simply figure ourselves, under the great roof, looking about us through a splendid thickness and dimness of air” (emphasis added). Despite its offhand placement following the semi-colon, as though it were an afterthought naturally proceeds from the first part of the sentence, this is *not* a minor caveat, for it contradicts the entire notion James began by perpetuating, namely that meaning will become manifest once we gain “*entrance*” to the structure, once we “reach our personal chair, our indicated chapel or shrine . . . *within*” (emphasis added). Yet as soon as we find ourselves “under the great roof” in James’s description, he depreciates the illuminative potential of the “inner view.” What we discern inside, he tells us, is not a way to “light our uncertainty,” but rather the opposite, “a splendid thickness and dimness of air, an accumulation of spiritual presences and unprofaned mysteries that make our impression heavily general—general only—and leaves us helpless for reporting on particulars.”

All of a sudden, enlightenment is relocated so that it lies not within but *without*: the “particulars” of interest “for our purpose,” James declares, have “their identity much rather in certain features of the twenty faces . . . that the structure turns to the *outer day*”

(emphasis added). To follow the opening metaphor, textual meaning is figured as a group of gargoyles on the roof of the cathedral that is *The Ring and the Book*. In other words, it is externalized and objectified simultaneously, figured as something that “we can . . . sit down before and consider at our comparative ease,” like a portrait or a statue. Here, of course, we might think of the “Last Duchess” in Browning’s monologue or the renderings of Marian Everett in James’s “The Story of a Masterpiece.” We also might recollect the novelist’s assertion, in “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” that “no literary figure of our day seems to sit more unconsciously for the painter” (“BWA,” 788-89). And we might be reminded of James’s evocation, also in the funeral essay, of the “converging faces” of the statues in Poets’ Corner, “the marble phantoms” he imagined to be forever “scrutiniz[ing] the claims of each new recumbent glory” (“BWA,” 787).

James asserts that the “identity” of the verse novel lies in “certain features of the twenty faces . . . that the structure turns to outer day,” a description that makes the work sound indubitably like that of an objective poet according to the terms of Browning’s own classificatory schema in the “Essay on Shelley.” The image of “faces . . . turn[ed] to outer day” also corresponds with the novelist’s experience of Browning’s social persona, most memorably expressed in his biography of William Wetmore Story as a conviction that the poet lived “almost equally on both sides” of a wall containing “an invisible door, through which, working the lock at will, he could swiftly pass[.]”<sup>25</sup> In this vein, James hails *The Ring and the Book* as “a great living thing, a great objective mass” (“NRB,” 800). Then, abruptly, the novelist launches into a “justification of Browning’s method” and proceeds to offer a characterization that unmistakably rings of the subjective poet:

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<sup>25</sup> HJ, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, 2:89.

To express his inner self—his outward was a different affair!—and to express it utterly, even if no matter how, was clearly, for his own measure and consciousness of that inner self, to *be* poetic . . . We move with him but in images and references and vast and far correspondences . . . and very soon . . . we feel ourselves . . . in the world of Expression at any cost. That, essentially, *is* the world of poetry[.] (“NRB,” 801)

This bears on what James considers *The Ring and the Book*’s chief flaw, namely that the “mere crude evidence” presented in the trial documents seems to be mediated excessively by “Browning’s general perception” of it (“NRB,” 797). The “very breath of our poet’s genius,” James complains, is “already, and so inordinately, at play on [the facts of the case] from the first of our knowing them,” so much so that “our choice of how to take it all is in a manner determined for us” (“NRB,” 796). And yet James extols *The Ring and the Book* for its representation of other minds even as he objects to its coloration by the “iridescent wash of [Browning’s] personality” (“NRB,” 800). “The magnified state is in this work still more than elsewhere the note of intelligence, of any and every faculty of thought, imputed by our poet to his creatures,” James declares, adding:

[I]t takes a great mind, one of the greatest . . . to make these persons express and confess themselves to such an effect. . . . [Browning] resorts primarily to *their* sense, their sense of themselves and of everything else they know, [in order] to exhibit them, and has for this purpose . . . to keep them persistently and inexhaustibly, under the fixed lens of his prodigious vision. (“NRB,” 799)

James describes Browning’s method as a function of shifting perspectives, “of looking at his subject from the point of view of a curiosity almost sublime in its freedom . . . and of smuggling as many more points of view together into that one as the fancy might take him to smuggle” (“NRB,” 793). Paradoxically, therefore, *The Ring and the Book*’s power to render multiple subjectivities is also, according to James, its most significant

limitation, for the “magnified state” of the characters’ perceptions comes about through the application of “the fixed lens” of Browning’s “prodigious vision.”

James then proceeds to imagine an alternative version of Browning’s magnum opus cast as a novel (“NRB,” 792). He writes:

From far back, from my first reading of these volumes, which took places at the time of their disclosure to the world, when I was a fairly young person, the sense, almost the pang, of the novel they might have constituted sprang sharply from them; so that I was to go on through the years almost irreverently, all but quite profanely . . . thinking of the great loose and uncontrolled composition, the great heavy-hanging cluster of related but unreconciled parts, as a fiction of the so-called historic type, that is, as a suggested study of the manners and conditions from which our own have more or less traceably issued, just tragically spoiled—or as a work of art, in other words, smothered in the producing. (“BWA,” 792)<sup>26</sup>

A “fiction of the so-called historic type” is precisely what James described as his goal in *The Aspern Papers*. In the Preface to the New York Edition of the novella, he describes having been motivated by a “revisiting, reappropriating impulse,” the urge to recast “the rich dim Shelley drama . . . in the very theatre of our own modernity.”<sup>27</sup> He explains that he “delight[s] in a palpable imaginable visitable past . . . the past fragrant of all, or of almost all, the poetry of the thing outlived and lost and gone, and yet in which the precious element of closeness, telling so of connexions but tasting so of differences, remains appreciable.”<sup>28</sup>

As in “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” here we find James grappling with Browning’s “difficulty” by entertaining a hypothetical scenario, in this case imagining the novel that “*might have*” *been* produced from the same primary documents (“BWA,”

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<sup>26</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, James mentions reading *The Ring and the Book* “in honor of Italy” in a letter to William dated 8 March 1870, shortly after the fourth and final volume of the verse novel appeared and while James was travelling in that country; see *HJ Letters*, 1:207-8.

<sup>27</sup> HJ, “Preface to the New York Edition” of *The Aspern Papers*, 28, 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> HJ, “Preface to the New York Edition” of *The Aspern Papers*, 31.

792, emphasis added). The wistful reminiscence is notable for its invocation of personal, impressionistic experience. James rarely describes his own phenomenological reaction to texts in his criticism. If, as Posnock contends, this suggests a change in the novelist's psychological relationship to Browning, then it also reveals a shift in his appreciation of Browning's relationship to his readers.<sup>29</sup> "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*," I want to suggest, constitutes an early example of the reader-response criticism developed later in the century by Poulet and Iser against the cultural backdrop of the emergence of intersubjectivity theory, as we discussed in the Introduction. For what James argues, albeit quite obliquely, is that *The Ring and the Book* is so massive—a "great loose and uncontrolled composition," a "heavy-hanging cluster of related but unreconciled parts"—that interpreting it necessitates remaking it for oneself in the sense of reconstructing the events depicted and privileging certain of its competing narratives over others to arrive at a coherent whole.<sup>30</sup> Browning, James writes, "keeps giving and giving, in immeasurable plenty," accumulating such an array of conflicting details that it is only "in our selection from it all and our picking it over that we seek, and to whatever various and unequal effect find, our account" ("NRB," 797). Significantly, James describes this as a two-fold process of revision: first, Browning "works over his vast material, and we then work *him* over, though not availing ourselves, to this end, of a grain he himself doesn't somehow give us" ("NRB," 797). The novelist repeats this point toward the close of the lecture:

"Browning works the whole thing over—the whole thing as originally given him—and

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<sup>29</sup> In *Henry James and the Problem of Robert Browning*, Posnock reads the "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*" as "an aggressive usurping of the poet's artistic authority, a violent assault" in words that "represents a symbolic initiation" for the novelist. According to Posnock, in publicly announcing what he perceives as the flaws in Browning's masterpiece, James "enacts revenge" and thus frees himself from the constraints of the Girardian double bind (189-92).

<sup>30</sup> The objections James levels against the abundance of *The Ring and the Book* are similar to the ones he made about *The Inn Album* in his review from 1877. These include general incoherence as well as the failure to be either narrative or lyric, prose or poetry.

we work *him*; helpfully, artfully, boldly, which is our whole blest basis” (“NRB,” 807).<sup>31</sup> James’s emphatic reiteration (“we work *him*,” “we work . . . *him*” [emphasis original]) makes it clear that he views *The Ring and the Book* as singular in the intensity of engagement it requires with its author’s mind.

As James describes it, the authorial imagination converges with that of the reader: from Browning’s depiction of “those wonderful dreadful beautiful particulars of the Italy of the eve of the eighteenth century,” the novelist writes, “I make to my hand . . . *my* Italy of the eve of the eighteenth century” (“NRB,” 804). To read *The Ring and the Book*, that is, “is fairly to be tangled, and at once, in the author’s complexity of suggestion, to which our own thick-coming fancies respond in no less a measure” (“NRB,” 805). James gives the following phenomenological description of the reading process:

[S]omething that will repay my fancy tenfold if I can but feel it, hovers before me, and I say to myself that, whether or no a great poem is to come off, I will be hanged if one of the vividest of all stories and one of the sharpest of all impressions doesn’t. I beckon these things on, I follow them up, I so desire and need them that I of course, *by my imaginative collaboration*, contribute to them—from the moment, that is, of my finding myself really *in relation* to the great points. (“NRB,” 803, emphasis added)

According to James, it is incumbent on the reader—it is his “duty”—to participate in this collaboration “as actively as possible” (“NRB,” 804). The novelist argues that what gives the reader access to *The Ring and the Book*—what allows him to penetrate the edifice of the work, as it were, if we extend the novelist’s own metaphor—is partly a function of his own personal response to Browning’s verse, what we might think of as the subjective. At the same time, James stresses that the process is a collaboration involving two parties:

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<sup>31</sup> “My only way of reading,” James later wrote in a letter describing the centennial, “is to imagine myself *writing* the thing before me, treating the subject—and in thereby often differing from the author and his—and/or *her*—way.” HJ to Mrs. W. K. Clifford, 18 May 1912, in *HJ Letters*, 4:617.



On the other hand, as certainly, it has taken the author . . . *to put me in relation* . . . He takes his willful way with me, but I make it my own, picking over and over as I have said, like some lingering talking peddler's client, his great unloosed pack; and thus it is that by the time I am settled with Pompilia at Arezzo I have lived into all the conditions. ("NRB," 804)

This way of reading, which James describes as "a rearrangement of relations," is what I have been calling as *reading intersubjectively* ("NRB," 806). As we have seen, it is the form of textual engagement demanded by the dramatic monologue.

In "Browning in Westminster Abbey," James celebrated the poet's "eagerness to put himself in other people's place, to participate in complications and consequences" ("BWA," 789). In "The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*," he ventures further, noting that Browning fosters this same quality in his readers. James's description of reading as being "settled with Pompilia at Arezzo" and having "lived into all the conditions" is one way in which the novelist acknowledges Browning's ability to facilitate inhabiting other minds. Another way this gets registered in the lecture is that James unabashedly projects himself into what (he imagines to be) Browning's mind in a way that he was reluctant to do in the earlier funeral essay. Now he posits himself as Browning spotting the Old Yellow Book "in the litter of a market-stall in Florence" and scooping up the "treasure" with a "swoop of practiced perception" ("NRB," 793). Taking a novelist's liberties, James then proceeds to render the scene, to imagine what Browning must have perceived:

What our great master saw was his situation founded, seated there in positive packed and congested significance, though by just so much as it was charged with meanings and values were those things undeveloped and unexpressed. They looked up at him, even in that first flush and from their market-stall, and said to him . . . "Express us, express us, immortalize us as we'll immortalize you!"—so that the terms of the understanding were so far cogent and clear. It was an understanding, on their side, with the poet; and . . . he could but understand in his own way. ("NRB," 793)

Several aspects of this passage are worthy of our attention. First, what James describes amounts to nothing less than an intersubjective encounter between the poet and his source materials—an “understanding” that is tacit but nevertheless “cogent and clear.” Yet while an unspoken agreement between the parties is reached, James is careful to emphasize that there are *two* experiencing subjects: “It was an understanding, *on their* [the documents’] *side*, with the poet; . . . and *he could but understand in his own way*” (emphasis added). As in any intersubjective encounter, that is, sameness and difference are comingled to an extent that renders them indistinguishable. Second, observe how James personifies the documents, referred to elsewhere as that “living and breathing record of facts pitiable and terrible” (“NRB,” 793), and endows them with the capacity to form thoughts in language, to convey to Browning something along the lines of, “Express us, express us, immortalize us as we’ll immortalize you!” This is similar to what he did with the statues in “Browning in Westminster Abbey,” and it is especially unusual here because he emphasizes the non-linguistic dimension of the encounter: “by just so much as it was charged with meanings and values were those things *undeveloped* and *unexpressed*” (emphasis added). As we have seen, the transmission of meaning via what is left unstated or implicit is the strategy of the dramatic monologue.

Tautological as it may be, James’s objection to *The Ring and the Book*—what he presents as his justification for rewriting the materials in the form of a novel—has to do with Browning not having written it as a novel in the first place. While acknowledging that “[t]he one definite forecast for this product would have been that it should figure for its producer as a poem” (“NRB,” 794), that is, James repeatedly insists that the nature of the plot “would have yielded up its best essence . . . under some fine strong economy of

prose treatment” (“NRB,” 792), that it positively plead[s] for our perfect prose transcript” (“NRB,” 810). It remains unclear from the rest of James’s critique, however, what exactly the material might gain from being rendered in prose as such. James’s complaints, after all, concern problems of perspective, not prosody; he never mentions Browning’s meter and he certainly does not suggest, as twenty-first century readers might expect, that the intricacies of the verse detract from the complexities of the plot. Instead, as we have seen, James’s main complaint about *The Ring and the Book* is its excessive coloring by what he refers to as Browning’s “prodigious vision.” He goes on to explain what he means:

[I]ntellectually, we back away from [the work] a little, back down before it, again and again, as we try to get off from a picture or a group or a view which is too much *upon* us and thereby out of focus. . . . and we thus recoil, we push our chair back, from the table . . . to see a little better what is on it. This makes a relation with [the poet] that is difficult to express. (“NRB,” 801)

As James describes it here, *The Ring and the Book* suffers from being too kaleidoscopic, from offering too many different perspectives at too close a range. As a result, the vision it offers appears to be “out of focus” and the reader is compelled to “back away from it a little, back down before it, again and again” in an attempt to focalize “the point at which the various implications of interest, no matter how many, *most* converge and interfuse” (“NRB,” 798). That the reader will make this attempt in vain is indicated by the iterative nature of the backtracking (“again and again”). This, in turn, recalls James’s evocation, at the start of the lecture, of approaching to the text/cathedral that is *The Ring and the Book* by circling “round and round” it. As Posnock has observed, this is precisely how James describes Maggie’s awakening consciousness in *The Golden Bowl*. Significantly for our purposes, it is also how he describes the genesis of *The Wings of the Dove*:

Long had I turned [the subject] over, standing off from it, yet coming back to it; convinced of what might be done with it, yet seeing the theme as formidable. . . . It was formed, I judged, to make the wary adventurer walk round and round it—it had in fact a charm that invited and mystified alike that attention; not being somehow what one thought of as a “frank” subject, after the fashion of some, with its elements well in view and its whole character in its face. It stood there with secrets and compartments, with possible treacheries and traps. . . .<sup>32</sup>

James wrote the “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*” in the first part of 1912, approximately three years after he had finished composing the Prefaces to the New York Edition of his collected works. As Cameron demonstrates and as we have discussed, the Prefaces offer an “aggressive reconception” of consciousness as James had represented it in his early novels.<sup>33</sup> To review quickly, Cameron persuasively shows that, whereas the Prefaces “stabilize a connection between consciousness and the self by asserting that the self is where consciousness resides,” the novels themselves “contradict that placement” by locating it between persons such that it becomes “an *intersubjective* phenomenon.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, James’s retrospective accounts of his early projects are at odds with the initial versions of those texts.

In “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*” James continues to uphold the notion he had propagated in the Prefaces, namely that a central, discrete, unifying consciousness is essential to the success of the novel. His account for how he would rewrite Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* makes it sound like one of his own novels—or, more accurately, like his descriptions of his novels in the Prefaces. “The first thing we do is to cast about for some centre in our field,” he writes, some “point of control” (“NRB,” 798). He locates

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<sup>32</sup> HJ, Preface to *The Wings of the Dove* (1909), 2nd ed., ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 2003), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Cameron, 41.

<sup>34</sup> Cameron, 77.

this center in what he calls the “embracing consciousness” of Canon Caponsacchi (“NRB,” 798), whom he regards as the embodiment of “the soul of man at its finest” (“NRB,” 800). According to James, “it is in *his* [Caponsacchi’s] consciousness and experience that she [Pompilia] most intensely flowers . . . [s]o that *he* contains the whole” (“NRB,” 810). In Caponsacchi, he writes, we find “a large lucid reflector,” the “indicated centre of our situation or determinant of our form” (“NRB,” 806). This description suggests a desire for a central, discrete, and unified consciousness on par with James’s account of his own narrative project in the Prefaces; indeed, then novelist’s problem with the work as realized by Browning is that it does *not* have such a center. Mere sentences later, however, James abruptly ends the lecture, questioning the decision to rewrite the text from Caponsacchi’s vantage point, wondering if, after all, it really *is* the centre of the work: “[T]he difficulty is that I see so many more things than I can have even dreamed of giving you a hint of,” James says (“NRB,” 808). He ends by declaring that *The Ring and the Book* is a “performance . . . [in] preparation for something” (“NRB,” 804). As will see in the next section, that “something” was the decentered, relational, intersubjective form of consciousness represented in his own late novels.

### **PART III.**

## **CONCLUSIONS AND REPERCUSSIONS**

## The Dramatic Monologue and the Modernist Novel:

### On *The Wings of the Dove*

*Call a novel a picture of life as much as we will; call it, according to one of our recent fashions, a slice . . . of life . . . still . . . it has had to be selected, selected under some sense for something; and the unity of the exhibition should meet us . . . at the point at which that sense is most patent.*

—Henry James, “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*” (1912)

In this dissertation, I have attempted to distill the essence of Henry James’s well-recognized contribution to modernist narrative technique. I have argued, first of all, that this contribution is a function of James’s interest in the concept of intersubjectivity, and, second but no less important, that it is mediated by his engagement with the poet Robert Browning, both in person and on the page. In the process, and to some extent in contrast to the prevailing critical tendency to regard modernist fiction’s concern with representing the vicissitudes of consciousness as a distinctly lyrical gesture, I have demonstrated how, for James, it emerges from a longstanding enthrallment with the dramatic monologue as realized by Browning in particular. In tracing both the development of James’s interest in intersubjectivity and its mediation via Browning from his earliest stories and reviews to his mid-career masterpiece, *The Aspern Papers*, to the posthumous tributes to the poet he made near the end of his own life, I have aimed to show that James knowingly takes up Browning’s preoccupation with intersubjectivity. Furthermore, I have suggested that he does so by adapting the methods and strategies of the dramatic monologue in general—

and frequently recycling the themes and images of “My Last Duchess” in particular—to narrative prose, facilitating an active, implicit relationship between the reader and the text that I have called *reading intersubjectively*.

At this point, I want to address a possible objection to the manner in which I have pursued my argument having to do with textual selection. It might appear, I realize, that my account of the Browning-James relationship has emphasized, perhaps unduly, certain of these writers’ works at the expense of others. This was, to some extent, an inevitable consequence of the depth of connection I desired to trace. Nevertheless, I recognize that my discussion has privileged “My Last Duchess” and *The Aspern Papers* to a degree that might be seen as problematic. To this I would answer that, in Browning’s case, the early monologue “My Last Duchess” is at once representative of his poetic contribution (in its technique) and exemplary (in the extremity of the situation it represents). As such, I see the poem as a turning point in Browning’s career, as assessment in which I am not alone.<sup>1</sup> I regard *The Aspern Papers* as an analogous and equally pivotal text for James, a bold step in the direction of the late style of the Major Phase, for reasons that I will explain shortly.

That James was conscious of appropriating Browning’s methods is clear from his explicit rewriting of the poet in the early tales “The Story of a Masterpiece” and “A Light Man.” This debt becomes no less pronounced over the course of his career, and James’s works continually register it in ways both overt and subtle. In this light, for instance, it is

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<sup>1</sup> A number of critics have made this contention going back to Browning’s own lifetime. See, for instance, H. B. Forman, review of *Graffiti d’Italia* by William Wetmore Story, *Fortnightly Review* 11 n.s. 5 (1869): 117-20. Forman describes what he saw as the emergence of a “Psychological School of Poetry” in response to Browning’s innovations in the dramatic monologue (117-18).



significant that *The Aspern Papers* recounts an attempt to ransack the poetic past even as James exploits the form of that most Victorian of poetic genres, the dramatic monologue.

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“The all-important point of connection between Browning and the modern novel is, of course, Henry James,” proclaimed the surrealist poet Hugh Sykes Davies in a 1962 lecture at the University of Hull.<sup>2</sup> At the time, Browning’s popularity had waned and his work was fading into relative obscurity. Davies, who viewed this as the result of a chasm between Browning’s verse and that of his twentieth-century counterparts, used the lecture to resuscitate the poet’s reputation by showing his contribution to what by then was being designated as modernism. According to Davies, although “Browning may have had little direct influence upon modern poetry,” he nevertheless “was emphatically among those present at the birth of the modern novel in England,” and, moreover, “the circle in which it was reared was warmly conscious of his presence.”<sup>3</sup> What the modernist novelists “got from [Browning], the precise manner in which his presence was exemplary for them,” Davies goes on to suggest, was deeply “psychological” in the following sense: Browning’s capacity, in the dramatic monologue, to match the “flow of his victim’s consciousness with a fluid freedom of language”—note how Davies conjoins liquid motion to mental life à la Husserl, G. H. Lewes, and William James—effectively prepared the reader “to perform the contortions . . . demanded of him by . . . the modern novel, where the inner monologue, the soliloquy, takes its place beside narrative and

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh Sykes Davies, *Browning and the Modern Novel* (Hull: Univ. of Hull Press, 1962), 6. Davies made these remarks on 16 February 1962 for the annual St. John’s College Cambridge Lecture at Hull.

<sup>3</sup> Davies, 5, 9.

dialogue in the depiction of ‘incidents in the development of a soul.’”<sup>4</sup> As Davies observes, in Browning and in the later works of novelists like James, meaning—what Davies calls “the valuable effect”—inheres not in “any stated conclusion” but rather “in the process to which the reader has been subjected, in the experience he has been led through.” As a result, Davies continues, “the mere content of the lesson is what matters least; what matters overwhelmingly most is the indication of how to feel, to think, to observe, to relate[.]”<sup>5</sup> The notion that the reader is “subjected” to the experience of the text and that his subjective reaction—how he is made “to feel, to think, to observe, and to relate” to it—outweighs the importance of its objective contents is, as we saw earlier, the basic assumption underlying the reader-response theory of criticism developed by Poulet and Iser. In addition, it is the essence of *reading intersubjectively*.

In making his case for Browning’s relevance to the modern novel, Davies relies heavily on James’s funeral essay on Browning as well as the novelist’s lecture on *The Ring and the Book*. In both pieces, James repeatedly stresses Browning’s “modernness,” seemingly using the adjective to refer both to the poet’s unprecedented experimentalism and the public’s tepid reception of the same. As early as 1890, James vaunted the “very modernness . . . the all-touching, all-trying spirit of [Browning’s] work, permeated with accumulations and playing with knowledge” (“BWA,” 788). By the time he delivered his lecture at the Browning Centennial in May of 1912, literary modernism was well underway, in no small part thanks to James’s own efforts in works like *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), to which I will turn now by way of offering a few conclusions.

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<sup>4</sup> Davies, 11-12, 14. The phrase “incidents in the development of a soul” is Browning’s own description of his representational goal in the preface to his ambitious early narrative poem *Sordello*. While, like Davies, I am speaking here of Browning’s influence on the modernist novel, it nonetheless bears remarking that Ezra Pound based *Three Cantos* on *Sordello*.

<sup>5</sup> Davies, 24.

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James concludes “The Novel in *The Ring and the Book*” by imagining the poet as a kind of angel: “Browning’s great generous wings are over us still and even now, more than ever now; and . . . they shake down on us his blessing,” the novelist writes (“NRB,” 810).<sup>6</sup> The image with which James closes his lecture on Browning is notably similar to one he had used almost a decade earlier in the climactic final scene of *The Wings of the Dove*. Here it is the consumptive young American heiress Milly Theale who is figured as a winged being—a dove, in keeping with the novel’s title—by Kate Croy, the other central female character, who plays the part of devoted friend to the dying Milly while harboring ulterior motives comparable to those of Maximus Austin, the narrator of “A Light Man.” Kate’s two-faced nature generates most of the drama of the novel, which revolves around the efforts she makes, in conjunction with her fiancé, Merton Densher, to exploit Milly’s romantic feelings toward him in order to obtain the financial means to support their own marriage. The scheme appears to have been foiled after Milly divines the couple’s secret engagement; after her death, however, it is revealed that Milly has bequeathed Densher a vast sum in spite of his deception. In the novel’s last chapter, Densher and Kate have the following conversation about Milly:

“I was never in love with her,” said Densher.

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<sup>6</sup> James’s invocation of Browning “hang[ing] high in the heaven of our literature,” to use a phrase of the *Aspern* narrator (*AP*, 46), benevolently bestowing his “blessing” on those who remain below, is notable for its suggestion that “now, more than ever now” the poet offers an example for aspiring writers to look up to as they strive to “Make It New.” (Recall James’s assertion, at the end of the funeral essay, that Browning has “widened the allowance, made the high abode more comfortable for some of those who are yet to enter it” [“BWA,” 790-91]).

... “I believe that now—for the time she lived. I believe at least for the time you were there. But your change came—as it might well—the day you last saw her; she died for you then that you might understand her. From that hour, you *did*.” With which Kate slowly rose. “And I do now. She did it *for* us.” Densher rose to face her, and she went on with her thought. “I used to call her—in my stupidity—for want of anything better—a dove. Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to *that* they reached. They cover us.”  
“They cover us,” Densher said.<sup>7</sup>

In this moment, even as the plot of the novel diverges from that concocted by Kate and Densher, James maintains, for a fleeting instant, the possibility for the same end result to be achieved by alternative means. “She did it *for* us,” Kate avers in what amounts to the suggestion that, impediments now having been removed, she and Densher should follow through with the plan to use Milly’s money to finance their life together. He responds with an ultimatum, insisting that if Kate wishes for him to marry her, then she must consent to his relinquishment of the bequest.

The interpretive crux of the novel hinges on Densher’s apparent transfer of loyalty from Kate to Milly in this scene. His behavior is abrupt and incomprehensible in light of the rest of the novel: time and time again we have been privy to agonized depictions of his conscience surfacing for an instant only to be submerged again at once by a relentless undertow of self-justification. Like many of the novel’s other unexpected and seemingly miraculous occurrences—events that appear to involve psychic or telepathic abilities—Densher’s sudden moral transformation is difficult to believe, at least under the auspices of realism.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, part of the reason it is so incredible is due to the fact that he and Kate

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<sup>7</sup> HJ, *The Wings of the Dove*, 2nd ed., ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 2003), 406. This text reproduces that of the New York Edition of 1909, which James had revised. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *WD*.

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking, for instance, of the scene, early in the novel, when Kate and Densher serendipitously cross paths on the Tube, or, similarly, the moment when Milly knows from a single glance at Kate that Densher has returned to London. In both of these incidents, characters seem to be able to read one another’s minds.

hitherto have been represented as sharing a singularly intense intersubjective connection. In the 1909 Preface to the New York Edition, James promulgates this idea, describing the novel as that of “picture constituted” by “a pair of natures well-nigh consumed by a sense of their intimate affinity and congruity, the reciprocity of their desire” (*WD*, 14). Such “intimate affinity and congruity,” such “reciprocity,” James adds, led him to represent his “two prime young persons” as having an “associated consciousness,” at times even “a practical *fusion* of consciousness” (*WD*, 11). Toward this end, for the first four hundred pages of the novel Densher and Kate are shown to be so single-minded in the pursuit of their goal that by the final scene it is difficult to regard them as individuals, much less to believe that their desires could diverge so sharply.

In what is arguably the most pivotal scene of the novel, Milly is escorted to see a portrait by the sixteenth-century Venetian painter Agnolo Bronzino. The portrait James describes is based on an image Lucrezia Panciatichi (née de Medici), the Renaissance noblewoman who, for a short period before her early death, was the Duchess of Ferrara, Browning’s “My Last Duchess.” [fig. 14]. In a much-analyzed scene from the novel, James describes Milly’s encounter with the image:

. . . she found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait though tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angel-esque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her in words that had nothing to do with her. “I shall never be better than this.” (*WD*, 139).



FIGURE 14. Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi by Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. ARTStor.

As she stands before the portrait, Milly experiences a peculiar epiphany. What is posited as the source of recognition (“Milly recognized her *in* words . . .” [emphasis added]) is immediately disavowed as such (“ . . . that had nothing to do with her”). Milly’s encounter with the Bronzino is a form of intersubjectivity that is both retrospective—the chapter begins by noting that “sundry impressions were not to be fully present to the girl till later on” (*WD*, 137)—and visual but pointedly *not* verbal. “What in fact befell was that, as she afterwards made out, it was Lord Mark who said nothing in particular—it was she herself who said all” (*WD*, 137). James writes:

It was all the while for Milly as if Lord Mark had really had something other than this spoken pretext in view; as if there were something he wanted to say to her and were only—consciously yet not awkwardly, just delicately—hanging fire. At the same time it was as if the thing had practically been said by the moment they came in sight of the picture; since what it appeared to amount to was “Do let a fellow who isn’t a fool take care of you a little.” The thing somehow, with the aid of the Bronzino was done . . . Once more things melted together—the beauty and the history and the facility and the splendid midsummer glow: it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon. (*WD*, 139)

Even if we remain unaware of the significance of the portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi to which it obliquely alludes, so much about this passage transports us back to Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” from the dialogue Milly imagines, including the reference to the “fool” (recall the “officious fool” in the orchard [27]), to the “splendid midsummer glow” (“The dropping of the daylight in the West” [26]).

While gazing at the portrait, Milly not only realizes something about herself—namely that her own death is imminent—at the same time that she seems to become aware of an unspoken connection between Densher and Kate. James writes:

Something else, from her first vision of [Kate’s] appearance three minutes before, had been present to her even through the call made by the others on her attention; something that was perversely *there*, she was more and more uncomfortably finding, at least for the first moments and by some spring of its own, with every renewal of their meeting. “Is it the way she looks to *him*?” she asked herself—the perversity being how she kept in remembrance that Kate was known to him (*WD*, 141-42).<sup>9</sup>

As Cameron points out, this scene represents “a complex transference of impressions between characters before a portrait,” one in which “thinking is confused with regarding a picture, in one instance, and with regarding what another mind is picturing, in the

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<sup>9</sup> HJ, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902, rev. 1909), 2nd. ed., ed. J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks (New York: Norton, 2003), 141-42.

second.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, “[b]ecause the looking seems to come from so many places, it is not clear what the looking is about. The unclarity is underscored because looking and the object of looking are fused, . . . [and so] are looking and thinking.”<sup>11</sup> This, for once, is in keeping with the description of the novel James gives in the Preface, in which he states his intention to represent not only “the whole ordeal of [Milly’s] consciousness” but also “the state of others as affected by her” (*WD*, 7). The difficulty presented by this subject, James writes, involved “know[ing] when to proceed from the one [perspective] and when from the other”; he says that he resolved this dilemma beginning with “the outer ring, [and] approaching the centre thus by narrowing circumvallations” (*WD*, 8). In this respect, *The Wings of the Dove*, with its “successive centers of consciousness,” is the structural equivalent of *The Ring and the Book*: Book I is narrated in the third-person from the vantage point of Kate Croy, Book II from that of Merton Densher, Books IV and V from that of Milly Theale, and so on. As such, *The Wings of the Dove*, like Browning’s verse novel, multiplies the number of minds the reader must “read between.”

James ends by admitting that he was forced, at times, “to consent, under stress, to a practical *fusion* of consciousness” and thus to represent an intersubjective “community of vision” (*WD*, 11-12). Along these lines, Leo Bersani demonstrates how the thoughts of the Jamesian narrator become assimilated to those of the other centers of consciousness to such an extent that the narratological and characterological perspectives end up being virtually indistinguishable. Bersani maintains that this “inner allegiance” elevates the importance of allegory as a hermeneutic framework for *Wings* since, for the narrator-center, individual personalities come to symbolize moral choices, and, furthermore,

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<sup>10</sup> Cameron, 125.

<sup>11</sup> Cameron, 127.



“social reality is constantly being transformed into a level on which characters serve mainly allegorical functions.”<sup>12</sup> In a slightly later work, he adds: “the tortuous moral arguments by which Densher tries to justify his failure to act dramatize an awkward transition from a novel of social relationships into an allegory of spiritual appreciations.”<sup>13</sup> Thus the modernist novel of consciousness was born.

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“What is new” about the Major Phase, Jill Kress Karn argues in a recent essay assessing the James brothers’ respective contributions to modernism, “is the degree to which [Henry James] makes the reader participate in the uncertainty that accompanies this new version of subjectivity.” This uncertainty, Karn goes on to suggest, becomes most prominent in *The Wings of the Dove*, as she explains: “When we read *Wings*, we struggle to identify a single character’s thoughts and motivations. We must consider them together more than separately; we must learn to read in reverse; listen for what does not get spoken, but nonetheless resounds.”<sup>14</sup>

*The Wings of the Dove* anticipates and demonstrates what will be recurrent elements of modernism: newness, experimentation, fragmentation, and disquietude. . . . [The novel] complicates intimacy and sometimes reads as if language, especially dialogue, instead of offering possibilities for communion, alienates and estranges.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Leo Bersani, “The Narrator as Center in *The Wings of the Dove*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 6 (Summer 1960): 131.

<sup>13</sup> Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 143.

<sup>14</sup> Jill Kress Karn, “William James, Henry James, and the Turn toward Modernism,” in *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism*, ed. David K. Evans (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 134. Note that, in the title of this volume, “James” refers to William, not Henry, though Karn’s essay considers both brothers.

<sup>15</sup> Karn, 124.

“[O]ne way to understand the novel’s end,’ she suggests, is “not as an example of late Victorian melodrama, but as an engagement with modernism that represents the logical extension of a self no longer protected, no longer contained, but rather formed through relations.”<sup>16</sup>

I want to suggest that the novel’s ending does both; that is, that it looks back to a well-known poetic version of Victorian melodrama, the dramatic monologue, and at the same time moves toward a modernist aesthetic by facilitating the intersubjective reading. Karn describes the experience of reading the novel in the same terms used by theorists of the dramatic monologue. “The layering effect of the narrative, the overlapping sense of time and events, the back and forth motion of the action, and the competing centers consciousness . . . mean that reading requires intense participation, even complicity,” she writes. Reading the novel, she adds, is “only a preliminary experience”; “*rereading* it” is essential.<sup>17</sup> She continues:

The language of subjectivity, the way into a character’s mind . . . takes a deeply circuitous route, unsettling traditional notions of narrative and point of view. Perhaps more than any other novel, this work puts on exhibit its opaque language, its indirectness and hesitations, and its sense of itself as an oblique path.<sup>18</sup>

This “oblique path,” as we have seen already, is the method of the dramatic monologue as well as the strategy used by the *Aspern* narrator in his pursuit the “precious papers” (*AP*, 142). James describes Milly and Lord Mark’s approach to the Bronzino portrait as taking place via a similarly “circuitous route”: “Their progress . . . was not of the straightest; it was an advance, without haste, through innumerable pauses and soft concussions,” he writes (*WD*, 137). “The Bronzino was, it appeared, deep within, and the

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<sup>16</sup> Karn, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Karn, 128.

<sup>18</sup> Karn, 124.

long afternoon light lingered for them on patches of old colour and waylaid them, as they went, in nooks and opening vistas” (*WD*, 138).

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Like *The Aspern Papers*, *The Wings of the Dove* is deeply concerned with reciprocal understanding, both in the sense of whether such mutuality is possible and, if so, how to recognize it when it occurs. And as in the earlier novella, in *Wings* this issue is routed through letters. Early in the novel, as they are hatching their plot, Densher and Kate confront the question of how to handle the issue of correspondence while he is away. Densher is concerned that if Milly sees his hand on the envelope, she will know that their relationship is more intimate than it appears.<sup>19</sup> In this way, letters—material documents—mediate the interactions between minds. Similarly, at the end of the novel, when Densher produces a letter from Milly’s lawyer, presumably informing him about the inheritance of some fraction of her estate, Kate remarks, surprised, that he has not yet broken the seal. Densher seems to have anticipated her remark.

“If I had broken the seal—exactly—I should know what’s within. It’s for you to break the seal that I bring it.”

She looked—still not touching the thing—inordinately grave. “To break the seal of something to you from *her*?”

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<sup>19</sup> Kate and Densher have the following conversation:

“But there’ll be my letters.” [said Densher].

The girl [Kate] faced his letters. “Very, very many?”

“Very, very, very many—more than ever; and you know what that is! And then,” Densher added, “there’ll be yours.”

“Oh I shan’t leave mine on the hall-table. I shall post them myself.”

He looked at her a moment. “Do you think then I had best address you elsewhere?” After which, before she could quite answer, he added with some emphasis: “I’d rather not, you know. It’s straighter.” (*WD*, 73)

“Ah, precisely because it’s from her. I’ll abide by whatever you think of it.”

“I don’t understand,” said Kate. “What do you yourself think?” And then as he didn’t answer: “It seems to me *I* think you know. You have your instinct. You don’t need to read. It’s the proof.” (*WD*, 396)

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The burning of the letter in *The Wings of the Dove* has important precedents in James’s fiction. Letters are destroyed in many of the short stories, including “Benvolio” (1875), “John Delavoy” (1898), and “The Abasement of the Northmores” (1900).<sup>20</sup> The plot of *The American* (1877) hinges on Christopher Newman’s possession of a letter implicating the mother and brother of his beloved, Claire de Cintré, in the murder of her father, a grisly twist worthy of Browning. Cameron observes that the whole novel hinges on how Newman behaves with respect to that letter and that, interestingly, James, like his character, vacillates about it: “Newman, in the early editions, turns to the flame presumably to try to retrieve the letter in order to enjoy his revenge. In the revised text of 1907 James rewrites the novel’s ending, making Newman unambiguously turn away from the fire.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the last sentence of the novel tells us that “Newman instinctively turned to see if the little paper was in fact consumed; but there was nothing left of it.”<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, this is a moment that gets restaged at the end of *The Aspern Papers*. It

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<sup>20</sup> In *What Maisie Knew* (1897, rev. 1907), ed. Paul Theroux (New York: Penguin, 1985), we again find letters burned with a sadistic flourish: “[Maisie]’s first term was with her father, who spared her only in not letting her have the wild letters addressed to her by her mother: he confined himself to holding them up at her and shaking them, while he showed his teeth, and then amusing her by the way he chucked them, across the room, bang into the fire” (39). In this case, the fiery destruction allows Maisie’s father to keep her from knowing her mother’s mind.

<sup>21</sup> Cameron, 39-40.

<sup>22</sup> HJ, *The American*, ed. James W. Tuttleton (1877; New York: Norton, 1978), 309.

also gets restaged at the conclusion of *The Wings of the Dove*, when Kate and Densher realize the intersubjective power of the letter.

“To hold it,” [Kate] brought out, is to know.

“Oh I *know*!” said Merton Densher.

“Well then if we both do—!” She had already turned to the fire, nearer to which she had moved, and with a quick gesture had jerked the thing into the flame. He started—but only half—as to undo her action; his arrest was as prompt as the latter had been decisive. He only watched, with her, the paper burn; after which their eyes again met. (*WD*, 397)

The intense intersubjective moment of Kate and Densher’s gaze returns us to the central confrontation between Juliana and the *Aspern* narrator. I have suggested that *The Aspern Papers* represents a turning point in James’s career, a step in the direction of the late style and a movement toward an intersubjective mode of personal relatedness—what James referred to as “shifting centers of consciousness”—that came to be the defining feature of the novels of the Major Phase. Surprisingly, the theme of intersubjectivity in James’s fiction depends on—and, indeed, emerges as—a function of materiality, through documents, statues, and paintings that prompt speculation about other minds. The literal existence of such aesthetic objects matters very little, as evidenced by the fact that we never learn the contents of Jeffrey Aspern’s letters. There is no easy equivalence between texts and minds, as much as James’s characters might wish for this to be the case. Other minds are conceived as objects of one kind or another, but there is no set of conventions for interpreting their contents. As a result, readers are left to their own relationship to the text—what I have called *reading intersubjectively*—and the result is the ambiguity for which Browning and James are known.

## EPILOGUE

### The Afterlife of Letters: On Browning, James, and Correspondence

“The posthumous vulgarities of our day add another grimness to death,” James proclaimed in a letter dated 28 August 1891, just four years after his depiction of such “posthumous vulgarities” in *The Aspern Papers* and less than two years after Browning’s passing.<sup>23</sup> The novelist was writing to his longtime friend, the distinguished scholar and Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton, after learning that Norton had been charged with editing the letters of James Russell Lowell, another great man of letters who recently had died.<sup>24</sup> Despite his stated assurance that Norton was equal to the task, James later faulted the published work, declaring the selected epistles to be insufficiently “illustrative of [Lowell’s] London life.” As James perceived it, the years Lowell passed in London had been “the richest period of his existence . . . in the particular way in which letters are an expression of ‘richness’ and would have given a picture, very delightful to possess, of the play of his mind in a far greater multitude than he had ever had before.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *HJ Letters*, 3:353.

<sup>24</sup> As I mentioned in the Introduction, James Russell Lowell was a friend that James and Browning shared, and this fact provides an important point of connection between them. Henry James and Lowell knew one another through Cambridge intellectual circles. In the 1840s, Lowell reviewed and corresponded with first Elizabeth Barrett and then Robert Browning; when the Brownings temporarily left Florence in 1851 on an extended visit to England, Lowell and his wife rented Casa Guidi for two months. Correspondence between Lowell and James survives, as do letters between Lowell and Browning. The former is reprinted in Edel’s edition; for the latter, see *Browning to His American Friends: Letters between the Brownings, the Storys, and James Russell Lowell, 1841-1890*, ed. Gertrude Reece Hudson (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965). Another key figure in this context is William Wetmore Story, the American expatriate polymath whose biography James wrote in 1903. Hudson observes that Lowell and Browning enjoyed “an international, three-way friendship, with Story in a pivotal position,” and the claim is also true with respect to James (1).

<sup>25</sup> HJ to Charles Eliot Norton, 15 November 1893, in *HJ Letters*, 3:441.

Throughout James's lifetime, and especially as he grew older, the publication of fellow-writers' letters became a source of frequent complaint. Surprisingly, his objections stemmed less from a conviction that the deceased author's privacy had been invaded than from a belief that his legacy would be tarnished in eyes of the reading public. In 1912, for instance, shortly before his lecture in honor of the Browning Centennial, James expressed dismay at the publication of a selection of George Meredith's letters:

What lacerates me perhaps most of all in the Meredith volume is the meanness and poorness of editing—the absence of any attempt to project the Image (of character, temper, quantity and quality of mind, general size and sort of personality,) that such a subject cries out for; to the shame of our purblind criticism.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, upon reading Sidney Colvin's edition of the letters of his good friend Robert Louis Stevenson, he sniffed, "One has the vague sense of omissions . . . one *smells* the thing unprinted"; the volume, he declared, had erred on the side of "over-suppression."<sup>27</sup> In all three of these cases, James objected to the publication of the letters on the grounds that they did not do justice to the mind of the man who had written them, a grievance that bears comparison with the novelist's experience of Browning's social persona as well as his initial encounters with other well-known intellectuals of his day. "The best letters seem to me the most delightful of all written things—and those that are not the best the most negligible," James declared in another letter to Norton in 1899. "If a correspondence has not the real charm I wouldn't have it published even privately; if it has, on the other hand, I would give it the glory of the greatest literature," he added.<sup>28</sup>

In theory, this was all very well; in practice, however, it seems to have been more complicated. These issues came to the fore most prominently when James, like Browning

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<sup>26</sup> HJ to Edmund Gosse, 10 October 1912, in *HJ Letters*, 4:629.

<sup>27</sup> HJ to Sidney Colvin, [?] October 1899, in *Lubbock*, 2:167.

<sup>28</sup> HJ to Charles Eliot Norton, 24-28 November 1899, in *HJ Letters*, 4:123.

with respect to Elizabeth, found himself tasked with guarding the unpublished legacy of his family; first, his father, Henry James, Sr., who passed away in 1882; then his only sister, Alice, in 1892; his older brother, William, in 1910, and, finally, himself. The existence of the personal diary Alice kept during the last three years of her life proved especially troubling to James. Katharine Loring, Alice's caretaker, had four copies of the volume printed, one for herself and one for each of the three surviving James brothers. Though he called the diary "magnificent" and "wonderful," James was "terribly scared and disconcerted" by it, as he explained in a letter to William:

I was . . . alarmed—by the sight of so many private names and allusions in print. I am still terrified by this—as I partly feel responsible as it were—being myself the source of so many of the things told, commented on etc. This kept me from being, at first, able to express anything but my anxiety—and my regret that K. P. Loring hadn't sunk a few names, out initials—I mean in view of the danger of accidents, some catastrophe of publicity.<sup>29</sup>

A later missive repeats the same idea:

the printedness-*en-toutes-lettres* of so many names, personalities, hearsays (usually, on Alice's part, through *me!*) about people etc. has, through making me intensely nervous and almost sick with terror about possible publicity, possible accidents, reverberation, etc., poisoned as yet a good deal of my *enjoyment* of the wonderful character of the thing. . . . The other day, in Venice, Miss Wormeley . . . said to me, as if she knew all about it, "I hear your sister's *letters* have just been published, and are so delightful": which made me almost jump out of my skin.<sup>30</sup>

As a result, James was adamant in directing his literary executor and oldest nephew, Harry, to serve as "a check and frustrator" to any irreverent "post-mortem exploiter." The novelist emphasized his "utter and absolute abhorrence of any attempted biography or the

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<sup>29</sup> HJ to Mr. and Mrs. William James, 25 March [1894], in *HJ Letters*, 3:477.

<sup>30</sup> HJ to Mr. and Mrs. William James, 28 May 1894, in *HJ Letters*, 3:479-80.



giving to the world by ‘the family’ or by any person for whom my approval has any sanctity, of any part of parts of my private correspondence.”<sup>31</sup>

In this respect, the novelist had much in common with Browning. When, in 1880, a Mr. John Ingram proposed writing a life of Elizabeth, Browning of course discouraged the project with vehemence. Two years later, however, the persistent biographer sent the poet proofs of the completed work along with the request that he correct any errors he might find therein. Browning refused, but this got him thinking about the fate of his late wife’s correspondence once more. A letter on the subject to his brother-in-law makes it clear that he saw safeguarding the privacy of the letters as tantamount to protecting his late wife’s posthumous legacy—to say nothing of his own. The specter of the poet’s demise figures prominently in the missive:

Now, I possess hundreds of letters—besides those addressed to me . . . and moreover am promised the reversion of other collections when their owners die. . . . While I live, I can play the part of guardian effectually enough—but I must soon resolve on the step necessary to be taken when I lie no longer—and I complete my seventieth year next Sunday. I shall soon have to pass in a very superficial review of all these letters, just inspecting so much of them . . . as to ascertain what should be destroyed, what preserved as containing nothing to hurt the living or the dead: it is an immense sacrifice—but one that must be made, and I shall not for a moment consider anything but what I know would be the desire of my wife in the matter.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> HJ to Henry James III, 7 April 1914, in *HJ Letters*, 4:806. Evidently Harry took his uncle’s injunction very seriously, becoming vexed after the success of the Lubbock edition, when, as he put it, “almost everybody who ever received a letter or two from my Uncle Henry” seemed to want to see their relics in print. “Most of these people,” by his account, were “merely reaching out for a few shillings or ministering to their own vanity” (quoted in Edel, introduction to *HJ Letters*, 1:xxix-xxx). Thus, when the family archive was given to Harvard in honor of the novelist’s centenary in 1943, it was with the stipulation that the contents be made available to post-doctoral researchers only. This caveat was intended to stave off posthumous exploitation; as Harry later put it, he did not want “my father and Uncle Henry writing dissertations for inexperienced students” (xxxi).

<sup>32</sup> RB to George Moulton-Barrett, 2 May 1882, in *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, ed. Paul Landis (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1958), 304-6.

Pamela Neville-Sington points out that in fact “Elizabeth had been more sanguine on the subject of biography, believing only that one ‘*ought* to be let alone while one’s alive.’”<sup>33</sup>

“The publication of such letters is repugnant to me,” Browning wrote to his friend Eliza Fitzgerald in September 1880, while reading a volume that reproduced some of the correspondence of French statesman François Guizot. He continued:

I have intact the long series of letters addressed to me by my wife before our marriage—and *what* letters! I have never opened the box of my own letters [of] which she wore the key round her neck: but one bitter-sweet experience awaits me when—at no very distant day—I shall—for the first and last time—reread them—and then destroy—hers and mine together.

Browning concludes this dramatic proclamation with a rather more equivocal justification for not already having taken action on the matter: “However other people feel differently, and the destruction of such crowns and palm-branches will be hard to bear, no question—hence the postponement of it.”<sup>34</sup> Evidently Browning did proceed to destroy a vast swath of his correspondence: “Two years ago, I spent more than a week in destroying my own letters to my family,” he wrote to his brother-in-law in the final year of his life.<sup>35</sup> Yet as Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair observe, the poet “preserved [EBB’s] letters and his own replies to them, never quite facing up to the likelihood that their existence would eventually lead to their publication.”<sup>36</sup> Browning had told Isa that he would do “*all in*

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<sup>33</sup> Neville-Sington, 49. The EBB quotation is from a letter to George Mouton-Barrett dated 2 February 1852, in *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, 162-68. While EBB’s attitude toward biography was more resigned her husband’s, her subsequent comments make it clear that she did not look kindly on the practice: “The vultures should wait a little till the carrion is ready, and not pluck out the living eyes— . . . Apart from painful subjects, . . . to be dragged into the light and examined as to the colour of your hair and the number of your teeth, is a hideous ceremony, and you have a right to protest against it while you live and feel and blush” (163-64).

<sup>34</sup> RB to Eliza Fitzgerald, 19 September [18]80, in *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas Fitzgerald, 1876-1889*, ed. E. C. McAleer (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), 92-93.

<sup>35</sup> RB to George Moulton-Barrett, 21 January 1889, in *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, 320.

<sup>36</sup> Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair, *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: A Literary Life* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2007), 397.

[his] power” to ensure that the letters remained private, adding that he would “enjoin on Pen to hinder [publication] by every possible means.”<sup>37</sup> Pen, however, did not heed his father’s wishes. In 1899, ten years after Browning’s death, he controversially published his parents’ correspondence as *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, an immensely popular volume that came to be known as the “Browning love letters.”<sup>38</sup> James’s reaction to the publication of the poets’ correspondence is surprising. As he told one of his correspondents, “I don’t . . . think the Browning case to be lamented. The interest of the people & the passion makes it right. Sometimes this happens—sometimes this fails—but when it does happen the rightness consecrates.”<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps following Browning’s example, James fiercely guarded his privacy and frequently boasted of having burned vast amounts of his correspondence. As he explained to the widow of the celebrated psychical researcher Frederic Myers when she asked if he had anything to contribute to a volume of her late husband’s correspondence:

I doubt if I have anything very substantial to send you. . . . When, some 2 or 3 years before [Myers’s] death, I broke up my London existence, I committed to the flames a good many documents, as one does on the occasion of the great changes & marked dates & new eras, closed chapters, of one’s life.<sup>40</sup>

Here James construes the letter-burning impulse as universal (“as one does. . .”), but, as the astonishing number of his surviving missives attests, those to whom he was writing evidently were not compelled to such incendiary tendencies—not when it came to letters from “The Master,” at any rate. Due to the reciprocal nature of correspondence, the vast majority of the letters James burned were not those he had penned but rather those he had

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<sup>37</sup> RB to George Moulton-Barrett, 2 May 1882, in *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*, 305.

<sup>38</sup> For the first edition, see *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

<sup>39</sup> HJ to Eveleen Tennant Myers, 8 April 1904, in *HJ: A Life in Letters*, 398-99.

<sup>40</sup> HJ to Eveleen Tennant Myers, 8 April 1904, in *HJ: A Life in Letters*, 398-99.

received, and thus—in a terrific example of Jamesian irony—a significant number of the novelist’s surviving letters describe his acts of epistolary destruction. “I kept almost all letters for years—till my receptacles would no longer hold them; then I made a gigantic bonfire and have been easier in mind ever since,” he told one correspondent.<sup>41</sup> Perusing the largely one-sided correspondence becomes an experience comparable to reading a dramatic monologue, not least of all because we are attuned to the speaker’s abundant self-contradictions. Reading published correspondence, that is, requires not only that we read between the lines but also that we read between the minds; in short, it demands that we read intersubjectively.

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<sup>41</sup> HJ to Annie Fields, 2 January 1910, in *HJ Letters*, 4:541.

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## VITA

Jennie Kay Hann was born on January 25, 1983, in Rapid City, South Dakota. An only child, she spent her formative years in rural South Dakota and North Dakota, where she developed a passion for reading anything and everything she could get her hands on. When she was thirteen, her family moved to Austin, Texas. She graduated from Westlake High School in 2001 and matriculated at Stanford University later that year, ostensibly to major in Chemistry. She quickly realized that California was not for her and transferred to Harvard University for her sophomore year. After two consecutive but equally mind-numbing summers as a scientific research intern, first at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston and then at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, she realized that she preferred the library to the laboratory and decided to devote herself to the study of literature. She earned her A. B. *magna cum laude* in English from Harvard in 2006, writing a thesis entitled “‘Racked Nerves’ and ‘Virulent Passions’: *Jane Eyre* and Victorian Psychiatry.” Another one of her undergraduate essays, “Perverting *Pride and Prejudice*: Wharton’s American Alternative to the Novel of Manners,” was awarded the Edith Wharton Essay Prize and published in the *Edith Wharton Review* in 2007. Jennie went on to receive an M.A. with Distinction in Victorian Studies from Birkbeck College, University of London, where she wrote a dissertation on obsessive-compulsive behavior in Dickens’s novels. Since entering the Ph.D. program at Johns Hopkins, she has served as Associate Editor of *ELH*, curated an exhibit on Stephen Crane at the George Peabody Library, and taught a Dean’s Teaching Fellowship course. In 2017 she will take part in the DISQUIET International Literary Program in Lisbon and São Miguel, Portugal.